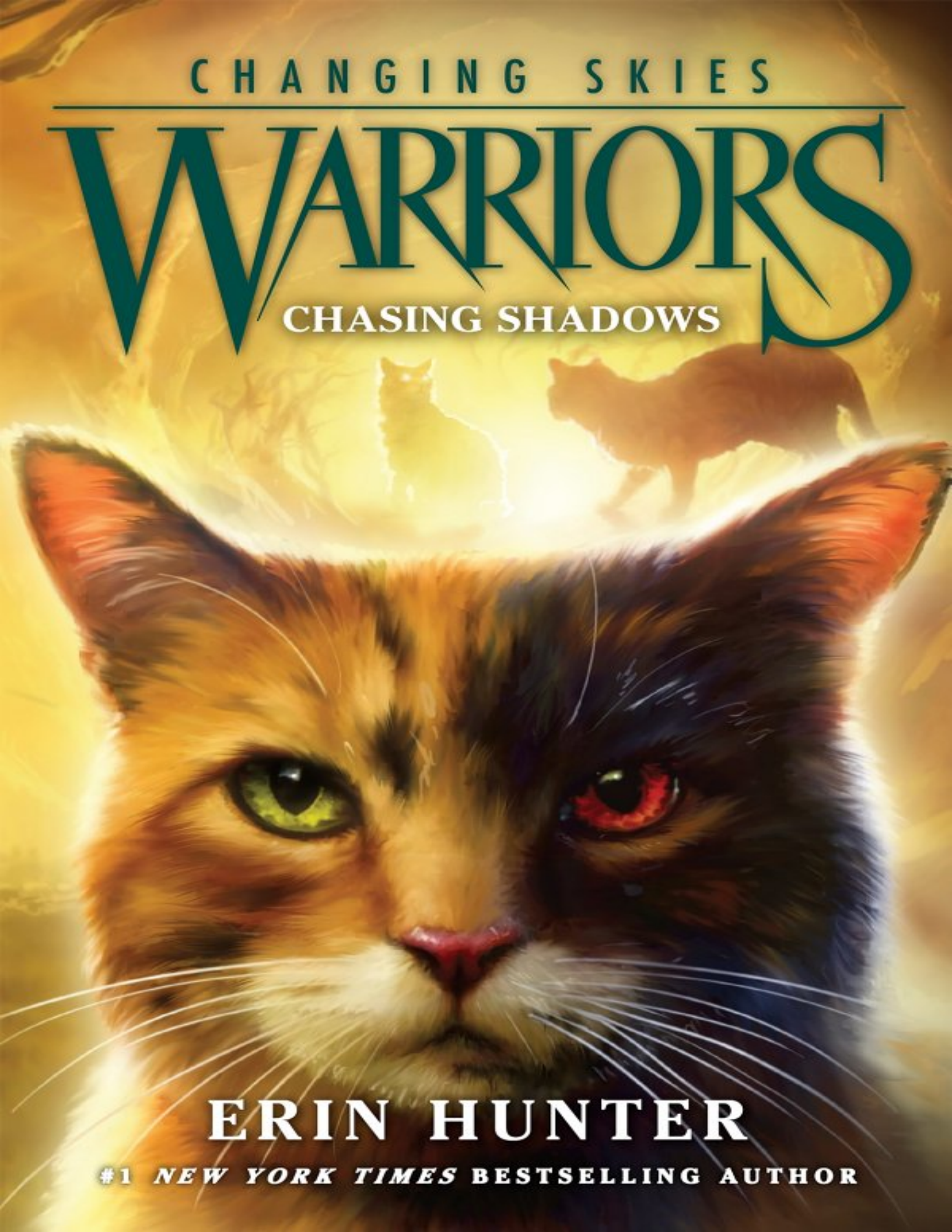
CHANGING SKIES
WARRIORS
CHASING SHADOWS
ERIN HUNTER
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHANGING SKIES

WARRIORS

CHASING SHADOWS

ERIN HUNTER

HARPER
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Dedication

To Sally

Special thanks to Cherith Baldry

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Allegiances

ThunderClan

LEADER

SQUIRRELSTAR—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

DEPUTY

IVYPOOL—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

MEDICINE CATS

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

ALDERHEART—dark ginger tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

BAYSHINE—golden tabby tom

BRISTLECLAW—orange-and-white tabby she-cat

SUNBEAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, MOONPAW (she-cat whose face is split between black and orange tabby)

POPPYFROST—pale tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

LILYHEART—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes

NIGHTHEART—black tom

WAFFLEPELT—gray-and-brown tom

BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes

CHERRYFALL—ginger she-cat

MOLEWHISKER—brown-and-cream tom

STEMTAIL—orange tabby tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

FINCHLIGHT—tortoiseshell she-cat

GRAYWHISKER—white tom with gray spots

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with petal-shaped white patches

EAGLEWING—ginger she-cat

DEWNOSE—gray-and-white tom

STORMCLOUD—gray tabby tom

HOLLYTUFT—black she-cat

FERNSONG—yellow tabby tom

HONEYFUR—white she-cat with yellow splotches

SPARKPELT—orange tabby she-cat

THRIFTEAR—dark gray she-cat

SORRELSTRIPE—dark brown she-cat

TWIGBRANCH—gray she-cat with green eyes

FINLEAP—brown tom

APPRENTICE, GOLDENPAW (golden tabby tom)

SHELLFUR—tortoiseshell tom

PLUMSTONE—black-and-ginger she-cat

FLIPCLAW—brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, SHINEPAW (black she-cat)

LEAFSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

SPOTFUR—spotted tabby she-cat

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

MYRTLEBLOOM—pale brown she-cat (mother of Oakkit, a pale brown tabby she-kit with white spots;

	Sunkit, an orange tabby tom; and Hazelkit, a tortoiseshell she-kit with white spots)
	FERNSTRIPE—gray tabby she-cat (mother of Shykit, a gray-and-white she-kit; Puffkit, a fluffy gray tabby she-kit; and Leapkit, a black-and-white tom)
ELDERS	(former warriors and queens, now retired)
	BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
	THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom
	CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes
	BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches
	BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

ShadowClan

LEADER	**TIGERSTAR—**dark brown tabby tom
DEPUTY	**CLOVERFOOT**—gray tabby she-cat
MEDICINE CATS	**PUDDLESHINE**—brown tom with white splotches
	SHADOWSIGHT—gray tabby tom
WARRIORS	**TAWNYPELT**—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
	STONEWING—white tom
	SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom with slashed ears
	FLAXFOOT—brown tabby tom
	DOVEWING—pale gray she-cat with green eyes
	CINNAMONTAIL—brown tabby she-cat with white paws
	SNOWBIRD—pure white she-cat with green eyes
	YARROWLEAF—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes
	GRASSHEART—pale brown tabby she-cat
	WHORLPELT—gray-and-white tom
	HOPWHISKER—calico she-cat
	BLAZEFIRE—white-and-ginger tom
	FLOWERSTEM—silver she-cat

	SNAKETOOTH—honey-colored tabby she-cat
	APPRENTICE, REDPAW (reddish-brown tom)
	SLATEFUR—sleek gray tom
	POUNCESTEP—gray tabby she-cat
	GULLSWOOP—white she-cat
	SPIRECLAW—black-and-white tom
	FRINGEWHISKER—white she-cat with brown splotches
	APPRENTICE, SPRUCEPAW (silver tabby-and-white she-cat)
	BIRCHFEATHER—light brown tom
	BLOOMPETAL—black she-cat
	FIRBARK—brown tabby tom
	WHISPERBREEZE—gray tom
	STREAMRIPPLE—gray tabby she-cat
	HOLLOWSPRING—black tom
	SPARROWTAIL—large brown tabby tom
QUEENS	**LIGHTLEAP**—brown tabby she-cat (mother to Quickkit, a ginger tabby tom; Beechkit, a pale brown tom; and Poolkit, a white she-kit)
ELDERS	**OAKFUR**—small brown tom

SkyClan

LEADER	**LEAFSTAR**—brown-and-cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes
DEPUTY	**HAWKWING**—dark gray tom with yellow eyes
MEDICINE CATS	**FRECKLEWISH**—mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs
	FIDGETFLAKE—black-and-white tom
MEDIATOR	**TREE—**yellow tom with amber eyes
WARRIORS	**MACGYVER**—black-and-white tom
	DEWSPRING—sturdy gray tom

ROOTSPRING—yellow tom

NEEDLECLAW—black-and-white she-cat

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

SAGENOSE—pale gray tom

HARRYBROOK—gray tom

CLOUDMIST—white she-cat with yellow eyes

TURTLECRAWL—tortoiseshell she-cat

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

REEDCLAW—small pale tabby she-cat

BEETLESHINE—white-and-black tabby tom

MINTFUR—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

NETTLESPLASH—pale brown tom

TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat

PALESKY—black-and-white she-cat

VIOLETSHINE—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

BELLALEAF—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

QUAILFEATHER—white tom with crow-black ears

PIGEONFOOT—gray- and-white she-cat

GRAVELNOSE—tan tom

APPRENTICE, ROBINPAW (reddish-brown she-cat)

SUNNYPELT—ginger she-cat

BEESTING—white-and-tabby she-cat

NECTARSONG—brown she-cat

APPRENTICE, STARLINGPAW (black-and-white tom)

RIDGEGLOW—reddish she-cat with a white nose

BLOSSOMHEART—ginger-and-white she-cat

DUSKSHINE—white tom with brown paws and ears

QUEENS

WRENFLIGHT—golden tabby she-cat

ELDERS

FALLOWFERN—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

SPARROWPELT—dark brown tabby tom

CHERRYTAIL—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

WindClan

LEADER

HARESTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELFLIGHT—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

WHISTLEBREEZE—gray tabby she-cat

WARRIORS

BRINDLEWING—mottled brown she-cat

FEATHERPELT—gray tabby she-cat

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

WOODSONG—brown she-cat

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

LEAFCURL—white she-cat with gray spots

CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom

GRASSFUR—auburn she-cat

BRANCHLEAP—white tom

SONGLEAP—tortoiseshell she-cat

APPRENTICE, SILKYPAW (long-haired gray tom)

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

FLUTTERFOOT—brown-and-white tom

SLIGHTFOOT—black tom with white flash on his chest

OATCLAW—pale brown tabby tom

HOOTWHISKER—dark gray tom

APPRENTICE, FLUFFPAW (fluffy pale brown tom)

LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat

BROOKRIPPLE—black-and-white tom

STRIPEHEART—gray tabby tom

QUEENS	**APPLESHINE**—yellow tabby she-cat (mother to Rustlekit, a white tom with a brown tail, and Stretchkit, a brown tabby she-cat with white face markings)
ELDERS	**WHISKERNOSE**—light brown tom
	NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

RiverClan

LEADER	**ICESTAR**—white she-cat with blue eyes
DEPUTY	**OWLNOSE**—brown tabby tom
MEDICINE CATS	**MOTHWING—**dappled golden she-cat
	FROSTDAWN—light gray she-cat with blue eyes
WARRIORS	**DUSKFUR**—brown tabby she-cat
	MINNOWTAIL—dark gray-and-white she-cat
	HAVENPELT—black-and-white she-cat
	TROUTSHINE—brown-and-white spotted tom
	MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom
	RAPIDSPLASH—gray-and-white she-cat
	PODLIGHT—gray-and-white tom
	SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat
	LIZARDTAIL—light brown tom
	SNEEZECLOUD—gray-and-white tom
	BRACKENPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat
	MISTPOOL—tortoiseshell-and-white tabby she-cat
	GORSECLAW—white tom with gray ears
	NIGHTSKY—dark gray she-cat with blue eyes
	GRAYSKY—silver tabby tom
QUEENS	**FLOATSHIMMER**—tawny she-cat (mother to Heronkit, a silver she-kit, and Eelkit, a black tom)
ELDERS	**MOSSPELT**—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

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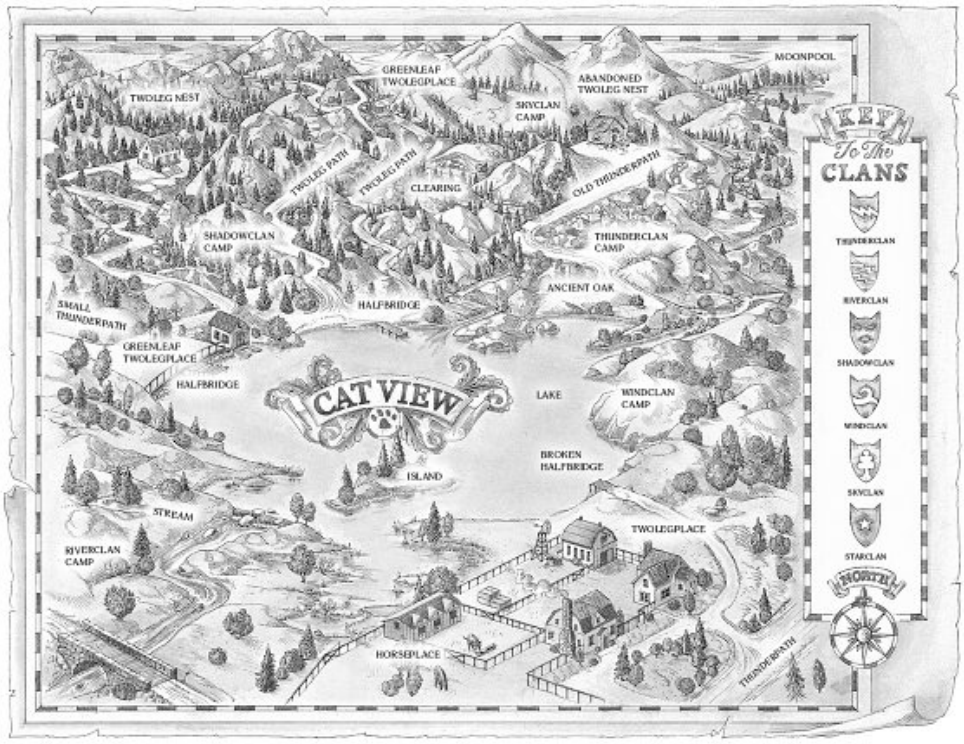
Maps


CAT VIEW
KEY To The CLANS
THUNDERCLAN
RIVERCLAN
SHADOWCLAN
WINDCLAN
SKYCLAN
STARCLAN
NORTH
MOONPOOL
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
ABANDONED TWOLEG NEST
TWOLEG NEST
SKYCLAN CAMP
TWOLEG PATH
TWOLEG PATH
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OLD THUNDERPATH
SHADOWCLAN CAMP
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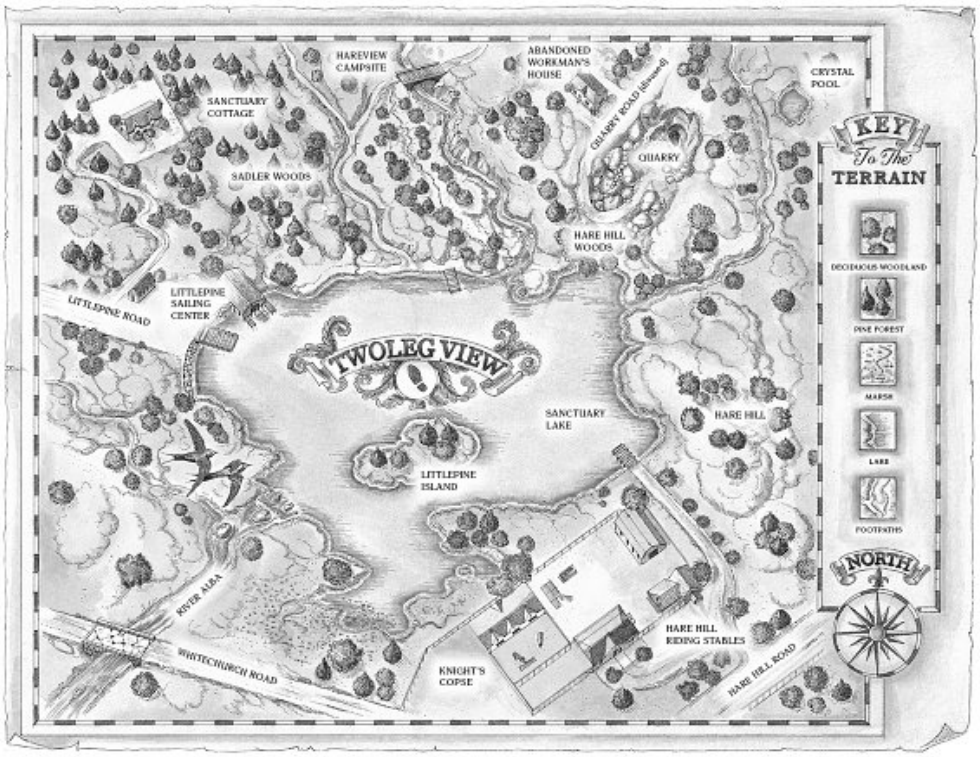
HORSEPLACE
THUNDERPATH



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Prologue

Cloudtail opened his eyes on unbroken darkness. Looking around in all directions, he strained his eyes to capture the least flicker of light. But there was nothing. For an instant, panic thrilled through him, his head spinning as he wondered whether he had gone blind.

Then his nose twitched as the sharp, dusty scent of rock tickled his nostrils; through his pads he could feel hard ground underpaw. Tilting his head upward, he opened his jaws to let air flow over his scent glands; he tasted traces of cold, slightly stagnant water coming from several fox-lengths ahead of him.

I must be in a cave, he thought, blinking confusedly as he tried to pierce the shadows that enfolded him like a thick pelt. *I'm not blind,* he thought. *But I don't think I've ever been here before. How did I get here?*

He pricked his ears and sniffed the air again, all his senses alert to find out more about his strange surroundings. The only cat-scent was his own; reassuringly, he couldn't pick up any signs of fox or badger, or any other predators. He was utterly alone.

Cautiously at first, he began to move around, straining to pick up the tiniest claw-scratch of light or any hint of cooler, moving air that might guide him to the way out. But there was no useful sign at all, only damp stone, cold water, and dense night.

What if there's no way out?

As fear, suppressed at first, began to rise within him, he picked up the pace until he was scurrying back and forth in an uncontrolled need to

escape. He stumbled against the rock walls and snagged his paws on unexpected crevices in the ground.

Several moments passed until he realized that he was moving too quickly, too easily, with unfamiliar energy surging inside him. He felt as though he were once again the young warrior he had been so many moons and seasons ago, not the elder that he was now.

Cloudtail halted, relief flooding over him. *Of course, this is a dream!*

He set out again to look for the opening of the cave, enjoying the sensation of moving more freely, without the stiffness in his limbs, the desperate yearning for air in his lungs. But as moment after moment slid by, he realized that he had been walking for a long time without finding any way of escape, without his eyes adjusting to the gloom.

He halted, struggling once again to control his panic. *This is just a dream,* he told himself. *Nothing bad can happen to me in a dream. I can't be hurt, and I can't die. . . .*

But however much Cloudtail tried to reassure himself, the feeling of foreboding was very hard to shake off. It felt like an unseen enemy, a burden on his back, with legs wrapped around him and claws sunk deep into his belly fur, forcing him down to the rock beneath his paws. The urge to flatten himself to the ground and wail his distress like a lost kit almost overwhelmed him.

As he fought to summon his courage, he caught a faint glimmer at the very edge of his sight. Spinning around, he saw that the walls of the cave had begun to give off a muted, pulsing light, a cold glow that made him think of . . .

Before he could finish the thought, Cloudtail's eyes flew open; he was awake in the familiar elders' den, his nest warm and comfortable around him, the air filled with the scents and soft breathing of Brightheart and his other denmates. Already the dream was falling from his memory like a heavy stone sinking into water. Catching at the fading ripples, he tried to remember what had happened, and why the glow in the cave wall had seemed so familiar.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Cloudtail concentrated as hard as he could, and at last the answer came to him.

The moon!

The radiance in the cave had made him think of the moon.

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Chapter One

For all Starlingpaw's pain, the image never left his mind of Crowfeather being dragged into the air by a huge eagle, then plummeting from a great height and disappearing behind the rocks. Agony stabbed through his leg as he struggled to keep up with the rest of the questing cats who streamed out ahead of him, headed for the precipice. His injury had almost healed, but racing along had opened the wound again. All that Starlingpaw and the other weary, pawsore cats could do was break into a desperate sprint to reach the edge of the cliff to discover whether Crowfeather could possibly have survived the terrible fall.

Starlingpaw was so worried about Crowfeather that he wondered whether their quest had been worth it. The cats had traveled from the lake territories to the mountain home of the Tribe of Rushing Water, hoping to find a way to renew contact with StarClan now that the Moonpool was closed to them. Crowfeather had spoken with Teller of the Pointed Stones, the Tribe's healer, and then with Feathertail, the RiverClan warrior who had died in the mountains. Now Feathertail walked the skies of StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting; she had been able to reassure Crowfeather that StarClan had not abandoned the warrior Clans, and that the medicine cats needed to watch for signs.

More ominously, Feathertail had said that a time of great change was coming. Whether it was good or bad would depend on the decisions that the Clans made. *How are we to know which choice is the right one?* Starlingpaw had wondered.

Now, as he raced to discover what had happened to the WindClan deputy, all his questions tumbled together in his mind like a litter of wrestling kits.

If Crowfeather is dead, will we ever find out the answers?

As the ground fell away in front of them, the cats skidded to a chaotic stop. Panting up in the rear, Starlingpaw heard a yowl of terror and saw Hootwhisker beginning to slide into the abyss as stone crumbled beneath his forepaws. Ivypool, a fox-length behind him, sprang up and sank her teeth into his tail, hauling him back onto safer ground.

"Thanks, Ivypool!" Hootwhisker gasped, his chest heaving as he took in great gulps of air.

Meanwhile, Starlingpaw and the other cats padded cautiously up to the very edge and stared down into the ravine. A trickle of water ran along the bottom, with sparse grass on either side and a few straggling bushes rooted among the rocks at the foot of the cliff.

Crowfeather lay beside the little stream, his paws splayed out and his tail drooping into the water. Even when Duskfur screeched out his name, he didn't move.

Is he dead? Starlingpaw could pick up the scents of tension and fear wafting off his companions' pelts and knew that they were all asking themselves the same question. *Could the WindClan deputy really have survived such a fall?*

"Come on." Ivypool broke the silence, her voice brisk and decisive. "We have to get to him."

She took the lead, picking her way paw step by careful paw step down the treacherous cliff face. The rest of the cats followed. Starlingpaw's muscles tensed as he felt pebbles and loose soil shift beneath his paws. All his body weight was forced onto his injured leg as he tried to navigate the steep slope. He couldn't keep up with the others; every shuffling movement was like sharp fangs driving into his flesh.

Eventually Nectarsong halted, glancing back over her shoulder. "Are you okay, Starlingpaw?" she called.

Every hair on Starlingpaw's pelt grew hot with frustration and embarrassment. In another moment, he guessed, his mentor would come back and insist he lean on her shoulder, showing his weakness to all their companions.

"I'm okay," he replied. "But I need to find a way down that isn't so steep."

“Should I come with you?” Nectarsong asked.

Starlingpaw shook his head emphatically. “No, I’ll be fine, thanks. I won’t be far behind. You need to get to Crowfeather as quick as you can!”

Nectarsong hesitated a heartbeat longer, then gave him a nod of agreement and carried on down the slope behind the others.

As Starlingpaw turned away, he could hear his companions creeping and slithering down the slope, their movements speeding up as they drew closer to the bottom.

Scanning the cliff face, he couldn’t see an easier route. It wasn’t a sheer drop, but all the possible paw holds that he could see were spaced out, and he already knew that the rock was treacherous and might easily give way under his weight. For a few endless moments he began to feel that he would be stuck on this cliff forever, unable to go up or down. Fear of having to be rescued flooded over him again.

Starlingpaw edged sideways, searching for a safe way down. Eventually he spotted a narrow path, winding back and forth across the face of the precipice. It was barely wide enough for him to put one paw in front of another, and covered with sharp chips of stone, but he was too desperate to be fussy. “Thank StarClan!” he murmured to himself as he hobbled along the dusty trail, his fur brushing the rocks on the inward side.

Heading gently downward, Starlingpaw didn’t need to put so much pressure on his injured leg. For most of the time, unless he had to steady himself at a turn in the path, he could raise the leg off the ground completely and struggle along on the other three. His pain faded, and he drew huge breaths of relief.

But the longer route gave Starlingpaw more time to imagine what he would find when he finally reached Crowfeather. When he dared to snatch a glance, he saw that his companions were still picking their way down the cliff. There was nothing to tell him whether there was still hope for the WindClan deputy. From a distance, it had looked as if the fall had ended his life. And if he was still alive, Starlingpaw worried that his injuries might be so bad that even the skilled medicine cats couldn’t help him.

By the time Starlingpaw limped up to his companions, they were all gathered around the body of the stricken warrior. Fidgetflake and Shadowsight were bending over him, while the rest stood back, giving the two medicine cats space to work.

“He’s breathing!” Fidgetflake exclaimed, his voice full of surprise.

“What?” Ivypool’s blue eyes were wide with shock. “He can’t be—surely . . .”

Fidgetflake didn’t respond, only crouching next to Crowfeather’s head and giving his mouth a good sniff. “There’s no smell of blood,” he meowed. “That’s a good sign. . . .”

Meanwhile, Shadowsight was running his paws carefully along Crowfeather’s spine and over his belly, and then down each of his legs. As he finished examining the last leg, he let out a gasp of disbelief.

Starlingpaw’s heart clenched at the sound. *Has Shadowsight discovered something horrible?*

But when the ShadowClan medicine cat looked up, his eyes showed mingled joy and confusion. “You won’t believe this,” he mewed shakily. “I hardly believe it myself. But Crowfeather doesn’t seem to have a single broken bone!”

At his words, a shiver of hope stirred Starlingpaw’s pelt, while the other cats let out exclamations of relief. But Fidgetflake still gazed doubtfully at Crowfeather’s body. “That’s all well and good,” he grunted. “But he’s still unconscious, and he could have internal injuries.”

Starlingpaw heard what the medicine cat said, but when he gazed at Crowfeather and saw the WindClan tom’s chest gently rising and falling with shallow breaths, his heart lifted as though he saw a ray of sunlight breaking through a mass of dark cloud.

Yet, along with his new optimism, he felt a stab of urgency. “We need to do something!” he exclaimed.

The heads of both medicine cats swiveled in his direction, their eyes narrowing as though they were offended that an apprentice thought he had to tell them what to do.

Embarrassed, Shadowsight couldn’t meet their gaze; he lowered his head and stared at his paws until Fidgetflake spoke again.

“Shadowsight, can you take a look around and see if you can find any useful herbs?” he asked. “Nettle would be good, in case he has internal injuries, and tansy for shock.”

Shadowsight gave him a doubtful look. “I wouldn’t expect to find much here,” he responded. “This place must be pretty barren during greenleaf, let alone in leaf-bare.” He rose to his paws and gave his pelt a shake. “I’ll do my best.”

“Should I come with you?” Starlingpaw asked.

Shadowsight shook his head. “Thanks, Starlingpaw, but foraging won’t be easy for you when you’re staggering around on three legs. Ivypool, will you come with me?”

“Of course.”

The two cats hurried away down the stream, with Ivypool keeping a lookout while Shadowsight sniffed among the sparse growth at the water’s edge, ruffling the leaves with his forepaws.

As they vanished around an outcrop of the cliff, silence fell among the remaining cats. One after another they sat down until they formed a ragged circle around Crowfeather. A worm of dread awoke in Starlingpaw’s belly. *I wish I could be* doing *something*, he thought impatiently. *This is too much like a vigil.*

Now and again Nectarsong bent her head to sniff at Crowfeather’s fur or touched her ear to his muzzle to check if he was still breathing. But there was nothing any cat could do to help him until Shadowsight and Ivypool returned with healing herbs.

As the silence stretched out, Starlingpaw’s inward dread swelled until it felt like a jagged stone lodged in his chest and throat. He clamped his jaws tight shut to stop himself from letting out a wail of sheer misery.

In the end, it was Hootwhisker who broke the silence. “Even if Crowfeather lives,” he began, “will we have to carry him back to the lake territories?” He shook his head helplessly, not bothering to hide his distress. “That will take forever!”

Nectarsong stretched out her tail and gave Hootwhisker a comforting touch on his shoulder. “If Crowfeather wakes up, he might be fit to travel tomorrow,” she meowed hopefully. “Seeing that he hasn’t broken any bones, he should be able to walk.”

Fidgetflake flexed his claws uneasily. “Even if he can walk,” he pointed out, “he’ll certainly have to go slowly. We have to face it; it’s going to take us a long time to get home.”

Nectarsong nodded. “Maybe one or two of us should travel back ahead of the rest,” she suggested.

What good will that do? Remembering when he had last spoken out of turn, Starlingpaw just managed not to annoy his mentor by saying the words out loud. What would be the point of rushing back to the lake, when the cat

who had learned something from Stoneteller was not among them? It was Crowfeather who had spoken with the Tribe's healer in the Cave of Pointed Stones, Crowfeather who had received the message from Feathertail and the Tribe of Endless Hunting. It was vital that *he* return to the Clans by the lake.

Starlingpaw's chest began to tighten in panic, the jagged stone feeling as though it were expanding to fill his throat and cut off his breath. *What if Crowfeather never recovers consciousness?*

He remembered seeing Crowfeather the night before, sitting up late with thoughts flickering like minnows in his blue gaze. Starlingpaw had suspected then that the WindClan tom was hiding something. Now desperation prickled in every hair on his pelt. He had to believe that their mission was worthwhile, vitally important to the well-being of the Clans. But now that belief was leading him to fear that it would all have been for nothing.

Wake up, Crowfeather, he pleaded silently, his gaze fixed on the WindClan cat's inert body. *Please wake up. . . .*

The sun was sliding down the sky and shadows were stretching across the ravine when Shadowsight and Ivypool returned. By then, the other cats had made a nest of dead leaves and moss in the shelter of a thornbush and carefully moved Crowfeather into it. Even being lifted and carried made no difference; the gray tom didn't stir a whisker.

Shadowsight padded up and dropped a bunch of nettles beside Crowfeather's body. "I couldn't find a sniff of tansy," he reported. "This will have to do for now."

Starlingpaw watched while Shadowsight chewed up some of the nettle leaves; Fidgetflake raised the unconscious cat's head so that his fellow medicine cat could try trickling some of the juices into Crowfeather's mouth. Starlingpaw couldn't tell whether he had managed to swallow any of it.

While she was escorting Shadowsight, Ivypool had hunted, and she returned now with a couple of scrawny mice and a blackbird.

"Thanks, Ivypool." Hootwhisker seemed as if he was forcing himself to sound cheerful. "Great catch."

Ivypool stared resentfully at the prey. “No, it’s a miserable catch. But it’s all I could find. I’ll lead a hunting patrol if any cat feels like joining me.”

No cat offered, only shifting uncomfortably and glancing at each other. Starlingpaw felt so exhausted that he didn’t think he could catch a mouse if it leaped into his jaws.

“We don’t know what might be lurking around,” Duskfur mewed. “Let’s share this fresh-kill and then try to get some sleep.”

The other cats murmured agreement and divided up the meager prey. Starlingpaw gulped down his few mouthfuls, then retired with the others to makeshift nests close to where Crowfeather lay.

Even though he was so weary that he could hardly pad the few paces to his nest and flop into it, Starlingpaw couldn’t rest. He lay listening to the other cats’ snores, but sleep evaded him like a swift rabbit or squirrel that slipped from his outstretched paws.

Finally he rolled over what he hoped would be the last time and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. *I* will *go to sleep!*

But almost at once, Starlingpaw caught a faint glow of something beyond his eyelids. *Moonlight?* he wondered, confused. When he had lain down to sleep, the sky had been covered with clouds.

Blinking his eyes open, Starlingpaw shifted and half sat up as he looked around to discover where the glow was coming from.

There was no moon. Instead, the shimmering silver form of Crowfeather was floating above his motionless body.

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Chapter Two

Tawnypelt paused outside the elders' den in ThunderClan's stone hollow. She longed to see the wise old cats to share with them her suspicions of the weird little apprentice, Moonpaw. But she still hesitated before calling out to them, wondering if this was a mouse-brained idea. Was it really the right decision to go to them and not Squirrelstar?

When Tawnypelt herself had been an apprentice, her Clanmates had been prejudiced against her because her father was the first Tigerstar, the cat who had almost destroyed the Clans to take power over the whole of the forest. She didn't want to prejudice any ThunderClan cat against Moonpaw; she didn't want the young cat to suffer in the way she had.

Just in case I'm wrong . . .

She could trust the elders, Tawnypelt thought, not to jump to conclusions about Moonpaw. It was time, she told herself, to stop dithering around and get on with what she needed to do.

"Hello!" she called out. "May I come in?"

"Is that Tawnypelt?" Brightheart's voice came from inside the den. "Of course, you're always welcome here."

Tawnypelt pushed her way through the dead branches of the fallen beech tree that screened the elders' den. Inside, Brightheart and Cloudtail were curled up together in their nest, their tails twined together as they affectionately shared tongues. Brackenfur was dozing, while Thornclaw

looked up from grooming his shoulder to give Tawnypelt a purr of welcome.

"It's good to see you, Tawnypelt," Cloudtail meowed.

"It's good to be here," Tawnypelt responded, dipping her head respectfully. "I hope you're all well."

Even while she spoke, Tawnypelt's heart ached to see how old and tired the elders looked, and how faint and raspy their voices were now. She had known them all her life and remembered when they were strong, proud warriors, with glossy pelts and gleaming eyes, ready to bring home fresh-kill or to defend their Clan from any danger that might threaten them.

No cat lives forever, she thought sadly, thinking of her littermate, Brambleclaw, old before his time, his strength drained by his extended stay in the Dark Forest when the impostor Ashfur had stolen his body. Now he lived in the medicine cats' den, struggling to fight off an infection.

"Well, if it isn't Goldenflower! Sit down," Brackenfur invited her, waking with a massive yawn.

Warmth surged beneath Tawnypelt's fur. "It's Tawnypelt, Brackenfur," she corrected gently. It pleased her to know that she reminded her old mentor of her mother, but she wondered how poor the old tom's memory was these days.

He narrowed his eyes at her, then nodded. "Of course, of course. Would you like to share prey? I think I've got a bit of vole here somewhere. . . ."

"No, I'm fine, thanks," Tawnypelt replied, sitting in a drift of dead leaves close to the edge of the den. "I'm worried about the prophecy that Bluestar gave me when I had that accident and almost died."

"We heard about that," Thornclaw murmured. "'Beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world.' Isn't that what Bluestar said?"

Tawnypelt nodded. "That's right. I've been trying to make sense of it ever since, and I can't help wondering . . ." She hesitated, still reluctant to put words to her suspicions. "I'm asking myself whether Moonpaw might be the two-faced cat. You only have to look at her, with her face divided like that."

Brightheart stared at her with her one good eye. "Moonpaw? Really?" She sounded as if she didn't believe it.

"You can't deny that Moonpaw behaves oddly sometimes." Tawnypelt was beginning to feel slightly defensive. "What about that night when she

took the kit out of the nursery?”

“I’m not sure she did,” Brightheart argued. “I heard that Sunkit was confused. And Moonpaw was sleeping in the medicine cats’ den that night—not wandering around trying to do harm.”

Tawnypelt didn’t contradict the ThunderClan she-cat, but privately she felt it wouldn’t be sensible to disregard the story. *Something strange was going on that night,* she told herself. *I can’t explain it, but I feel it right down to my bones.*

“That’s not all,” she continued. “When I visited Brambleclaw in the medicine cats’ den, he had a very odd outburst. He was looking off into the distance, and he said, ‘You don’t belong in this world!’ I suspected he was talking about Moonpaw, because she had visited him earlier.”

“That is strange,” Cloudtail admitted.

“Exactly,” Tawnypelt agreed. “I can’t put my paw exactly on what’s going on, but I can’t deny that all these weird things going on *around* young Moonpaw have me unsettled. It reminds me of all that business with Ashfur, when the evil creature left StarClan and tried to claim ThunderClan for himself.”

Thornclaw hunched his shoulders. “Those were terrible days.”

“Yes, and could something similar be happening now?” Tawnypelt asked. “Could dark spirits be circling Moonpaw, somehow using Brambleclaw to get close to her?”

Brackenfur shivered, and an uneasy air fell over the elders’ den. Tawnypelt could see that they were all thinking over what she had suggested.

The silence dragged on for many heartbeats; Thornclaw was the cat who broke it. “Why has Moonpaw even been around Brambleclaw?” he demanded, his fur beginning to bristle up. “She’s an apprentice; doesn’t she have any duties?”

“She’s been spending her nights in the medicine cats’ den because she’s had some trouble sleeping,” Tawnypelt explained. “It was decided to separate her from the other apprentices until she started behaving like a normal cat.”

“‘Normal’?” Brightheart sat up with a hiss, her shoulder fur bristling. “You look around the Clans, Tawnypelt, and tell me exactly what you mean by a ‘normal’ cat.”

“I’m sorry, Brightheart,” Tawnypelt responded with a sigh, thinking of all the bee-brains, mouse-brains, and downright difficult cats she had needed to deal with in her life. “You’re quite right. I should have said, ‘Until she doesn’t have the problems anymore.’”

Brightheart held Tawnypelt’s gaze for a moment, until Tawnypelt began to wonder if she was about to be thrown out of the elders’ den. Too late, she remembered that Brightheart knew a thing or two about being judged because of her unusual face. And Bluestar, too, had caused Brightheart quite a bit of pain when she was a young apprentice, refusing to make her a warrior and then giving her the horrible name of Lostface. Though Firestar had later changed her name, Brightheart certainly had reasons to doubt a prophecy from Bluestar.

“Moonpaw is a kindhearted young cat.” Brightheart sounded as if she hadn’t quite forgiven Tawnypelt for misspeaking. “She always means well. She has *never* caused trouble.”

The other elders murmured agreement, while Cloudtail drew his tail down the length of his mate’s spine until she relaxed. Tawnypelt could tell that they were all fond of Moonpaw, and told herself not to push their patience too far. She wanted to keep them on her side.

“I agree with Brightheart,” Brackenfur meowed after a moment, his voice calm and reasonable. “But I think you’re right, Tawnypelt, to be concerned about Moonpaw’s sleeping problems. It’s probably not a good thing for such a young cat to be spending so much time in the medicine cats’ den. It’s not like she’s their apprentice.”

“Not anymore,” Thornclaw added. “And that reminds me of all the talk there was around the time she was born. Many cats thought her divided face meant that she must have some kind of gift. None of us have ever seen a cat with a pelt like that. . . .”

“Maybe it means more than we thought,” Cloudtail suggested.

Brightheart gave her mate a flick around the ear with her tail. “Just because she looks different,” she declared in a gentle but forceful rumble, “doesn’t mean that there’s anything unusual about the kind of cat she is.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Tawnypelt protested. “It’s not what Moonpaw looks like that worries me, although her pelt does call to mind the prophecy about the two-faced cat. I just can’t shake off the feeling that all the weirdness happening around Moonpaw is a sign of something bad on the horizon.”

“A storm cloud,” Brackenfur murmured.

“Remember how none of us saw what was coming with Ashfur,” Tawnypelt went on. “And how every cat suspected Shadowsight when all the bad, strange stuff seemed to be gathering around him.”

“There was good reason for that,” Thornclaw pointed out.

Tawnypelt sighed. “I know. But Shadowsight is my son’s kit; how could I believe he would ever hurt any cat? And in the end I was proved right. Suspicion lay heavily on Shadowsight, but none of what happened was his fault. Ashfur deceived him horribly. So,” she continued, “if something similar is happening with Moonpaw, shouldn’t we learn the lesson from what happened with Shadowsight and try to help her now?”

The elders exchanged glances, clearly thinking deeply about what Tawnypelt had said. Though Tawnypelt’s fur was itching with impatience to know what they would decide, she made herself keep quiet.

“I think we should tell all this to Squirrelstar,” Cloudtail meowed at last. The other elders nodded in agreement, and Brackenfur added, “We can’t possibly keep this from her.”

Tawnypelt felt a jolt of alarm in the depths of her belly. It had been a difficult decision for her to reveal her anxiety to the elders; now she realized that of course these ThunderClan cats would want to pass on what she told them to their Clan leader.

“I understand that,” she mewed hesitantly, “though I’m worried that if you tell Squirrelstar, it might turn the whole Clan against Moonpaw.”

“Even so, if Moonpaw is struggling with anything dark, we need to help her,” Thornclaw pointed out. “Some cat needs to talk to her.”

“But we have to make sure she knows it’s not a punishment.” Brightheart’s gaze raked over her denmates as if she was daring them to disagree. “She needs to know that we just want to help her.”

“Of course we do,” Brackenfur responded. “However, I think for the time being she shouldn’t be allowed to visit Brambleclaw. Just to be on the safe side, until we work out what’s going on.”

The elders murmured agreement, exchanging glances of relief that Brambleclaw wouldn’t be in danger from a cat who might not mean any harm, but was certainly unpredictable.

Meanwhile, the elders’ words helped Tawnypelt to see a way forward. “Then suppose we let Jayfeather know,” she suggested. “He has the

authority to keep her out of his den. Besides, I've heard that Moonpaw has spent time with him, so I assume they get along well."

"As far as any cat gets along well with Jayfeather," Cloudtail muttered.

Brightheart batted him over the head with her tail. "Mouse-brain! I believe Moonpaw respects him, at least," she continued. "I think she missed working with him when she became a warrior apprentice."

"Then maybe Jayfeather can keep an eye on Moonpaw and make sure she's okay," Tawnypelt meowed. "And if he thinks Squirrelstar needs to know, he can tell her. I'll speak to him."

Purrs of agreement came from the elders, while Tawnypelt felt relief sweeping through her from her ears to the tips of her claws.

At least now I have a plan.

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Chapter Three

The air was crisp with frost and the sun shone in a pale blue leaf-bare sky as Moonpaw padded across the camp toward the medicine cats' den. Her paws tingled with the anticipation of seeing Brambleclaw again; she was longing to drink in his wisdom and sympathy as if it were clear, life-saving water. When she'd returned to camp the night before, Brambleclaw had been sleeping, so Moonpaw had spent a sleepless night waiting and hoping that her denmates wouldn't notice the wounds her littermate had given her.

Her last encounter with Morningkit had thoroughly spooked her. It terrified her that Morningkit was able to hurt her, and it wasn't fair that her sister thought Moonpaw owed her because she lived while Morningkit died. *That's not my fault!* Brambleclaw had shown her kindness and understanding before, and now Moonpaw was desperate for his comfort.

But as Moonpaw approached the den, she saw Jayfeather emerging from behind the bramble screen. After a couple of paw steps, his head turned in her direction, almost as if her scent was pulling him toward her. Then, swerving, he padded up to her.

"Hi, Moonpaw," he meowed. "If you don't have any apprentice duties, do you want to come with me to collect herbs?"

Moonpaw was slightly surprised at the medicine cat's friendly demeanor. She felt he *was* her friend, and she trusted him, but she was used to a much more brusque tone from him.

"No," she replied. "I'd like to see Brambleclaw, if that's okay with you."

"It's not okay." That sounded much more like the Jayfeather Moonpaw knew. "I want you to come with me. We need to gather all the herbs we can

before the really cold weather sets in and they all wither."

Moonpaw's pelt began to grow hot with anxiety. She didn't understand why Jayfeather was being so insistent. It wasn't as though she was still his apprentice. "I'd be happy to help you later, if Sunbeam says I can," she mewed. "But I'd really, *really* like to see Brambleclaw now."

"Why is it so urgent?" Jayfeather asked, his blue eyes narrowing as if he could see her.

Moonpaw hesitated, not knowing how to respond. "I can't explain," she replied at last. "I can't put it into words, but I *need* to speak with Brambleclaw."

Jayfeather's expression and tone softened. "It's not really a good time," he told Moonpaw. "Brambleclaw isn't up to having visitors right now."

While he was still speaking, Moonpaw looked over his shoulder to see Tawnypelt brushing past the bramble screen and stepping out of the den into the open.

Moonpaw stiffened, staring at the ShadowClan she-cat, then turned toward Jayfeather. *Did he lie to me?* Surprised and disconcerted, she didn't know what to say.

In spite of his blindness, Jayfeather seemed to understand what was troubling her; Moonpaw guessed he had picked up Tawnypelt's scent and the sound of her pelt snagging against the bramble tendrils.

"Of course, close kin can still visit Brambleclaw," he explained hurriedly. "But we need to limit the number of visitors he can have for the time being. There'll be other days you can see him, Moonpaw," he finished, an unfamiliar kindness in his voice.

While he was speaking, Moonpaw watched Tawnypelt pad away from the medicine cats' den; the ShadowClan cat had an awkward look on her face, as if she had overheard part of Moonpaw's conversation with Jayfeather.

Moonpaw felt her belly clench with a sudden feeling of tension, as if she had unintentionally swallowed crow-food. Had Tawnypelt warned Jayfeather to keep her away from Brambleclaw? She was Brambleclaw's sister; she was bound to be concerned about him.

But does she think I'm a bad cat? Does she think I'm going to hurt Brambleclaw somehow?

Moonpaw wanted to shriek at the ShadowClan cat, and at Jayfeather too, that she wasn't bad, and she wasn't a danger to Brambleclaw. It wasn't fair

that they should blame her, when all she wanted was to find comfort with the dying cat. Moonpaw thought that Brambleclaw found comfort with her, too. There wasn't another cat in the Clan who understood what was happening between her and Morningkit.

She remembered once more what Morningkit had said about "owing" her because Moonpaw had lived while Morningkit had slipped into death in spite of all her Clanmates did.

I'm the only cat in danger, she thought. *And that's why I need Brambleclaw, to help me keep up my courage.*

"I'm not asking you to come herb gathering with me just to keep you away from Brambleclaw," Jayfeather continued gently but firmly. "We have other things to talk about."

Moonpaw was so upset that the medicine cat's words swirled around her like leaves in a stream, carried away by the current. She stared past him toward his den as if she could see through the bramble screen to where the only cat who could help her was sitting. But Brambleclaw wasn't allowed visitors—or *she* wasn't allowed to visit him—and so he couldn't help her.

"I'll gather herbs with you another time," she mumbled, not looking at Jayfeather, then spun around and fled across the camp to the apprentices' den.

The elders had left their den, heading out for a good gossip with their Clanmates beside the fresh-kill pile, leaving Moonpaw with space to work. She felt thoroughly dejected as she bundled together the soiled bedding. She didn't mind doing the apprentice task; at first she hadn't even cared that her mentor, Sunbeam, had gone off on a hunting patrol and left her behind. Her mind had still been racing with the memory of her conversation with Jayfeather, and she didn't want Sunbeam scolding her again for being distracted.

But as time went on, her thoughts returned in every heartbeat to how Jayfeather was keeping her from the one elder who might be able to help her, the one cat who could make her feel better about everything that was happening to her.

Even worse, Morningkit wouldn't stop speaking inside her mind. She wouldn't stop going on about how Moonpaw couldn't confide in any cat.

How she couldn't *depend* on any cat.

Don't you see? she meowed. *Remember how Jayfeather lied to you and kept you out of his den? He doesn't trust you. No cat in this Clan trusts you. Why do you keep hoping that they ever will? They're just going to keep on mistrusting you, until one day—one day they'll start hating you.*

No, they won't, Moonpaw argued, unable to shut the voice out however hard she tried. *Jayfeather and Alderheart would never hate me. Sunbeam respects me. And our parents would never hate me—never!*

Keep telling yourself that if it makes you happy, Morningkit retorted with an unpleasant snicker. *But I'm right. It* will *happen. And when it does, they'll come for you.*

What do you mean, "come for me"? Moonpaw asked.

Morningkit's voice grew softer, with an undercurrent of menace. *One day—or probably one night, when you're asleep and helpless—they'll attack you, and they'll think they're doing it to protect themselves, before you attack them.*

"Stop it!" Moonpaw exclaimed aloud. "Stop threatening me!"

I'm not the threat, her dead sister went on. *I would never harm you. I'm trying to help you.*

Well, you're not. Go away!

That's exactly what I want to do! Morningkit spoke eagerly. *I want both of us to go away, alone, together—right now!*

The thought horrified Moonpaw. What would Morningkit be able to do to her if they left the Clan and went off together, far from any cat who could help her? She must be bee-brained, Moonpaw thought, if she believed that would ever happen.

But then, Moonpaw reflected, Morningkit could only ever see what *she* wanted. What Moonpaw wanted wasn't important to her.

Well? Morningkit urged her. *Stop fussing with that nasty bedding and come with me.*

Closing her eyes, Moonpaw shook her head vehemently. "You are the cause of all my problems!" she growled.

Her pelt tingled with satisfaction when she heard Morningkit gasp in surprise. But her satisfaction faded as her nose twitched at a warm scent that certainly didn't belong to her ghostly sibling.

Opening her eyes, Moonpaw turned to see Goldenpaw standing in the entrance to the elders' den. He looked disconcerted, blinking in confusion.

"Were you talking to me?" he asked. "What have I done?"

Moonpaw stared at him, struggling to find an explanation. She opened her jaws to reply, but she didn't know what to say. Instead, panic surged inside her, filling her chest and throat until it was impossible for her to speak. She fled out of the den, almost shouldering Goldenpaw aside.

With no thought in her head but escape, she bounded across the camp and plunged through the thorn tunnel into the forest. She headed for the lake, then veered off toward the SkyClan border, but no matter which way she ran, Morningkit was still there.

Goldenpaw will think you're crazy now that he's caught you talking to yourself, she taunted Moonpaw. *Even worse if he thinks you were talking to him. He'll tell the rest of the Clan, and soon* every *cat will think you're crazy.*

Stop it. That's not true, Moonpaw protested.

Every cat will be looking at you weirdly, Morningkit continued as if Moonpaw hadn't spoken. *Every cat will be wondering if they should banish you from the Clan to keep themselves safe. If that happens, you'll have no one.*

Moonpaw tried to ignore the voice in her head, tried to push away the horrible suspicion that Morningkit might be right.

But the voice continued, not mocking now, but gentle and loving.

Don't worry. You still have me, sister. . . . I'll always be here for you.

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Chapter Four

Paralyzed by shock, as if his whole body were stuck in mud, Starlingpaw stared at the shimmering white glow that had emerged from Crowfeather's body. He could see the walls of the ravine through the glimmering spirit as it walked here and there among the sleeping cats. The spirit's presence seemed to disturb them. Hootwhisker, who was supposed to be watching over Crowfeather, started up from a doze, blinking vaguely, then sank back into a half sleep. Ivypool sprang up as if she had sensed sudden danger. She was looking right at Crowfeather's spirit, but she didn't react to it at all, simply muttering, "Mouse dung," and curling up again with her tail over her nose.

They can't see him! Starlingpaw realized, instinctively averting his gaze to avoid catching the WindClan deputy's eye. He remembered what his kin, Tree and Rootspring, had once told him about the ghostly cats that they could see.

Ghostly cats were *dead* cats.

Starlingpaw wondered if he had inherited their ability; that was the last thing he wanted. It was too strange. He was even reluctant to look closely at the spirit, wondering if its appearance signaled that Crowfeather was on the point of death.

Or maybe he is dead already?

The WindClan tom had certainly still been alive when all the cats had settled down to sleep. Fidgetflake and Shadowsight had examined him last thing before going to their nests, and if he had died, they would have told

the others. And no cat would be sleeping: They would be sitting vigil for Crowfeather and wailing their grief.

A heavy sickness began gathering in Shadowsight's belly. Even if Crowfeather had still been alive when the cats settled down, that didn't mean he was alive now. And if his body still lived, how could his spirit be walking around outside it?

Crowfeather seemed to be asking himself the same question. Starlingpaw caught a few words here and there as the spirit moved among the sleeping cats. "I don't understand what's happening. . . . Hey! Why can't you hear me? Why don't you wake?" He stood in silent thought for a moment, then continued, "Maybe this is a good time to think over what Stoneteller told me, without any cat asking questions." He raised his head, blinking thoughtfully. "I wonder which cat he meant. How am I supposed to know?"

Once again the ghostly glow flitted this way and that, stooping over the sleeping cats. "Are you the cat Stoneteller was speaking about?" he mused as he bent over Ivypool. "Or is it you?" he added, moving on to Fidgetflake.

None of the cats stirred, not even Ivypool and Hootwhisker, who seemed to have sensed something when the spirit first appeared, and Crowfeather had no response to his questions.

Starlingpaw desperately wanted to know what Stoneteller had told Crowfeather back in the Cave of Pointed Stones. Maybe if he rose to his paws, met the spirit cat's gaze, and mewed, "I can see you, Crowfeather," the WindClan deputy would be so shocked that he would answer.

But Starlingpaw couldn't do it. He felt as if bramble tendrils were binding him, holding him in his nest. *Why me?* he asked himself wretchedly.

A moment later he realized that if he kept quiet, Crowfeather might reveal the secret, thinking that no cat could hear him.

So when Crowfeather's spirit came to stand beside him, Starlingpaw kept his head on his paws and his eyes firmly closed as if he were asleep. He could sense the spirit beside him from the gleam through his eyelids, and he heard Crowfeather's voice.

"Could it be you? An apprentice?"

Starlingpaw dared to open his eyes the merest slit and saw Crowfeather's spirit halt beside his inert body. His shimmering shape was beginning to fade. He raised his head to let out an anguished yowl: "How can I decide? StarClan, help me!"

The last few words died away into a moan of despair. The silver wraith faded, sinking back into Crowfeather's body.

Starlingpaw was left shivering in his nest as if every drop of blood in his body had turned to ice.

Starlingpaw padded along the top of the ravine, heading for a clump of thornbushes where he hoped prey might be lurking. A blustering wind penetrated his fur; he felt chilled and exhausted after his disturbed night.

Still, he was pleased to be away from the camp. He couldn't think of anything but the weird appearance of Crowfeather's spirit; he was so deeply immersed in the memory that he had hardly noticed when any cat spoke to him.

"You're unusually quiet," Fidgetflake had remarked, scrutinizing him closely. "Are you sure you're okay? Is your leg bothering you?"

"No, it's fine," Starlingpaw had replied. That was true. He had hardly thought about the ache in his leg since he had seen Crowfeather's ghostly form the night before.

"You don't need to worry about Crowfeather, you know," Shadowsight had added. "He made it through the night, and that's good news."

So he wasn't dead, Starlingpaw had thought. *Then why was his spirit wandering around like that?*

He didn't want to be forced into a conversation with the medicine cats, at least not right then. He knew they were concerned for him, but he couldn't explain without telling them more than he was willing to reveal. It was good to be alone, trying to make sense of what he had seen the night before.

Crowfeather's spirit had separated from his living body. He had been thinking about what Stoneteller had told him in the Cave of Pointed Stones and wondering which cat Stoneteller had meant.

Which cat could it have been? And why is it important?

Starlingpaw decided that when he returned to the makeshift camp, he would volunteer to watch over Crowfeather that night. This time, if he could summon the courage to reveal himself to Crowfeather, he might learn something valuable.

Starlingpaw had to hunt for a long time before he caught anything, and then it was only a scrawny mouse. Returning to the ravine, he found that none of his companions had been any luckier. Prey simply wasn't running in this desolate territory.

"Fidgetflake," he meowed as darkness was falling, "I'm happy to watch over Crowfeather tonight if that's okay with you."

The medicine cat nodded, clearly pleased. "That would be great, Starlingpaw," he responded. "Call me if you're worried about anything."

"I will."

When the other cats had retired to their nests, Starlingpaw crouched beside the still-unconscious WindClan deputy. Crowfeather's eyes were closed, his legs and tail motionless; only the gentle rise and fall of his chest told Starlingpaw that he was still breathing.

Fixing his gaze on the gray tom's body, Starlingpaw hoped that the spirit would rise again. He hoped too that Crowfeather would say more about what he had learned from Stoneteller. But the moments slid by, and no spirit appeared.

Starlingpaw was struggling to keep awake, almost convinced that nothing would happen, when he saw a faint shimmer of silver spread through Crowfeather's fur, then lift into the air, strengthening until it took on spirit form and began walking among the sleeping cats.

Crowfeather seemed agitated, tossing his head and twitching his tail as he padded to and fro. As on the previous night, he moved among the cats, pausing to gaze intently at each one. He would stretch out a paw to shake each cat's shoulder, as if he wanted to wake them. Starlingpaw could see that his spirit paws passed right through them, and no cat reacted to his touch.

"Why can't I wake you?" he exclaimed at last.

Finally he approached Starlingpaw; instinctively, he ducked his head and pretended to be asleep or dozing. When Crowfeather shook his shoulder, he felt a faint chill, as if he were brushing through frosted grass. His instinct was to flinch, but he managed to keep still, not revealing that he was aware of Crowfeather's presence at all.

A moment later the light touch vanished, and Starlingpaw guessed that the spirit had stepped away. He dared to open his eyes a slit and saw that Crowfeather had paused a couple of tail-lengths away and let out a forlorn mew, as if he was despairing at the sight of the silent, sleeping camp.

Starlingpaw felt so sorry for him that he almost lifted his head to let the WindClan deputy know that one cat could see him, but at the last moment he stopped himself. He had never spoken to a spirit before, and his fear of what might happen gripped him again.

I'll listen quietly. Maybe I can find out that way.

Glancing sideways through narrowed eyes, Starlingpaw could see the spirit begin to pad once more among the group. Finally he began to speak in a low, fretful tone.

"They need to know what I learned from Stoneteller, in case I don't survive to tell any cat. One of the cats here will be faced with a choice." A shudder shook the glowing spirit body. "This deceiver might walk a dark path that could cause great pain to all the Clans . . ."

Starlingpaw almost gave himself away then, swallowing down the screech of shock that nearly forced itself out. *That is the prophecy!* Every muscle in his body tensed with alarm at the thought that one of these cats—his companions who had accompanied him on this dangerous quest—could harm the Clans. *No!*

Finally, when no cat responded to him, Crowfeather threw his head back and let out an anguished yowl. "Why can't you hear me?"

Then the yowl sank to a low moan of despair, and just like the previous night the spirit faded, sinking back into Crowfeather's body.

Starlingpaw was left to ponder what he had said. What could Crowfeather's words mean? What was a deceiver, or a dark path? What could cause great pain to all the Clans? Starlingpaw dug his claws into the ground in a fit of frustration.

Stoneteller's prophecies aren't any easier to understand than StarClan's!

Then a claw of panic gripped Starlingpaw's chest. Maybe this time Crowfeather had died while his spirit was absent. Cautiously he crept forward a pace, close enough to be sure that the WindClan deputy was still breathing.

Thank StarClan!

Starlingpaw settled down to doze, hoping that by tomorrow Crowfeather's condition would have improved so that he could share the prophecy with every cat. If not, he wondered whether he ought to pass on what he had heard, what Stoneteller had told to Crowfeather. Would they

believe that he had seen the stricken cat's spirit, or would he have to convince his companions that he was not some sort of bee-brained cat?

StarClan knows, Tree and Rootspring had enough trouble.

But Starlingpaw knew where his duty lay, no matter what his companions thought about him. *If I'm the only one who can pass on the message, I'll have to do it, no matter what they think of me.*

Then cold seeped through Starlingpaw, as if he were crouching on an ice-covered lake. He realized that by taking responsibility, he was admitting to himself that Crowfeather might die. He would be a massive loss to the Clans, and to this quest, too. Starlingpaw didn't know whether the spirit had repeated everything that Stoneteller had said.

But he was too exhausted to go on worrying; however much he struggled, he couldn't stop himself from drifting into sleep.

Starlingpaw stirred, yawned, and opened his eyes to see the sun high in the sky. The ravine in front of him looked empty; he guessed that the other questing cats had gone hunting.

In his sleep he had shifted so that his back was to Crowfeather; turning, he saw that the two medicine cats were crouching over Crowfeather's body. Fear flared in Starlingpaw's heart as he saw their deep concentration, wondering if it meant that Crowfeather had died.

Then, as he crept closer, he realized that both medicine cats were purring happily.

"I can't believe he made it through another night," Shadowsight murmured, his voice weighted with wonder.

Fidgetflake pressed his ear to Crowfeather's chest, listening to his heartbeat, then straightened up with a satisfied sigh. The medicine cats exchanged a glance of relief.

"No thanks to you, dozy furball," Shadowsight snapped, glaring at Starlingpaw. "It's a good thing Crowfeather is strong."

Starlingpaw ducked his head and stared at his paws. "Sorry."

"I should hope so," Fidgetflake mewed sternly, then continued, "It's a really good sign that Crowfeather is still with us. Hopefully the rest is helping him recover."

A warm flush of relief crept through Starlingpaw at the medicine cat's words. But he was puzzled how that could be true. Crowfeather's spirit had

been so vivid during the night. Could a living cat's spirit really be so separate from his living body?

Maybe, Starlingpaw thought, *if the cat has a paw in two worlds.*

At his thought, he felt a jolt in his chest as if a rock had fallen on him. Unconsciously he had used the words of Tawnypelt's prophecy.

If Starlingpaw was right, was that why, before he was injured, Crowfeather had kept to himself the details of what Stoneteller had told him? Was he afraid that the prophecy was about him?

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Chapter Five

Tawnypelt opened her eyes in the warm dark of the ThunderClan apprentices' den. She could hear the three young cats' gentle breathing and just make out their rounded shapes in the dim light; careful not to disturb them, she slid out through the ferns.

She sat down, wrapping her tail around her paws, and gazed across the camp. Dawn was still some way off, and no other cat was stirring. Tawnypelt enjoyed the silence, broken only by the quiet rustling of the trees above, the chill of the air, the peace that lay over the stone hollow.

Yet at the same time her belly was churning with apprehension. This was the day she had decided to pay a visit to ShadowClan, to explain to her son, her Clan leader, why she wasn't coming home yet.

Tigerstar had told Tawnypelt to return to ShadowClan within two sunrises, but she had decided to stay here. *I guess I'm going to be in trouble.* She hoped that Tigerstar would understand why she couldn't leave ThunderClan territory when she explained that her brother was so desperately ill. Fear clung around her like cobweb that every time she talked to Brambleclaw, every moment they shared together, might be their last.

Shaking her head as if she could toss the thought away, she tried to swallow down the dread that rose from her chest into her throat.

Brambleclaw has been much more himself lately. . . .

But Tawnypelt couldn't ignore how much it had sapped Brambleclaw's energy to move from the leaders' den into the medicine cats'. The infection had weakened him, too. But Tawnypelt knew that if Brambleclaw hadn't

suffered so much in the Dark Forest, he wouldn't be so vulnerable to sickness now. Emotions rose inside her, wrestling with each other. She hissed out hateful words at Ashfur for all his scheming and how he had drained Brambleclaw's strength by taking over his body.

Her heart ached too for the decision she had made back when she was an apprentice to follow her father, the first Tigerstar, into ShadowClan, even though it meant leaving her brother behind.

We missed out on so much . . . all the things we could have done together.

If she had stayed in ThunderClan, her kits would have grown up as closer kin to Brambleclaw's. They would have been apprentices together, received their warrior names together; they would have hunted and fought side by side.

But Tawnypelt realized that by staying in ThunderClan she would have lost so much. She would never have been mates with Rowanclaw; the cat she had loved so deeply would have been no more than an occasional, remote presence at Gatherings. The second Tigerstar would never have been born.

It was *the right thing,* she reassured herself, *to leave ThunderClan all those moons ago.* It was just . . . now that she couldn't ignore the idea of Brambleclaw dying, her heart cried out for what she had never had.

Eventually, pale dawn light began to trickle through the trees above the stone hollow. Twigbranch emerged from the warriors' den, followed closely by Nightheart and Finchlight: the dawn patrol, heading into the forest.

Moments later, more cats appeared, clustering around Ivypool as she assigned them to hunting patrols. Tawnypelt rose to her paws, arched her back in a good, long stretch, then padded over to the medicine cats' den.

When she brushed through the bramble screen, she saw Alderheart and Jayfeather beginning to stir; Brambleclaw was still curled up in his nest, his eyes closed. Tawnypelt's heart lurched until she saw how his breathing stirred a feather just beside his nose.

Soon, but not yet.

With a nod to the rousing medicine cats, Tawnypelt paced quietly across the den and settled down beside her brother. The movement woke Brambleclaw; he lifted his head, gazing at her with blurred amber eyes as if he didn't recognize her.

"It's me, Tawnypelt," she murmured, her heart aching as she touched noses with him.

When she drew back, Brambleclaw's eyes had cleared. "Greetings . . . ," he murmured.

"I've come to say goodbye," Tawnypelt began. "I have to go back to ShadowClan."

Instantly Brambleclaw's gaze sharpened with distress, though he nodded in acceptance. "Of course," he rasped.

"But I'm coming back," Tawnypelt added hurriedly. "I promise I will. I just have to check in with Tigerstar so he knows what's going on."

Brambleclaw relaxed with a long sigh. "It's been wonderful having you here in camp," he mewed. "We haven't been together for so long, since we made the journey to find Midnight."

So long ago, Tawnypelt thought. *We were so young.*

Brambleclaw let out a raspy purr. "Say hi to Tigerstar for me. And I'll look forward to seeing you when you come back."

Tawnypelt stretched forward to lick her brother's ear, then turned and headed out of the den before he could see her grief and despair at finding him so weak.

Out in the clearing she spotted Squirrelstar heading with purposeful paw steps to the medicine cats' den. Tawnypelt halted beside her and dipped her head politely. "I have to take my leave, Squirrelstar," she meowed.

The Clan leader's green eyes were filled with all the anguish that was gripping Tawnypelt's heart. "Do you really have to go?" she asked. "It's helped Brambleclaw so much, having you here in ThunderClan. You're welcome, however long you stay."

Briefly, Tawnypelt hesitated. She knew how hard it was for Squirrelstar to anticipate losing her mate, especially as Clan leader, who had to show strength and resolution in front of her Clan.

"No, I really must return to ShadowClan," Tawnypelt mewed regretfully. "At least for a while. I'll come back here soon if you'll have me, but there's a conversation I need to have with Tigerstar. One I've been putting off for far too long."

By the time Tawnypelt trudged up the slope that led to the ShadowClan camp and pushed her way through the surrounding brambles, she felt dizzy with exhaustion. She would have liked to flop into her nest in the warriors' den and sleep for a moon, but she knew she couldn't do that. Instead she forced her paws in the direction of Tigerstar's den beneath the pine tree.

As Tawnypelt crossed the camp, passing groups of warriors outside their dens and near the fresh-kill pile, she became aware of silence falling. Some cats were staring at her, while others turned their heads aside as if they didn't want to look at her. She felt her fur prickle with apprehension, but she kept her tail and her head held high.

Something is going on. . . .

Then she realized that maybe her Clanmates were reluctant to greet her because no cat wanted to be the one who had to pass on terrible news. She had spent so much time around Brambleclaw, and around cats preoccupied with his fading life, that fear was only a heartbeat away.

I*f something has happened to Tigerstar . . .*

Then, as she approached the leader's den, she spotted Tigerstar standing outside it, beneath the Pinebranch from where he made announcements to the Clan. Seeing the expression on his face, the fury glaring from his amber eyes, his bristling fur, she understood now that her Clanmates' awkwardness had nothing to do with something tragic having happened in ShadowClan.

It had everything to do with Tigerstar being very, very angry with her.

Even though Tigerstar had been leader for many seasons now, a flutter of annoyance passed through Tawnypelt's chest. *I'm his mother!* It was so hard to remember that she had to respect his authority as her leader.

"Greetings," she meowed, respectfully dipping her head. "Brambleclaw sends greetings too."

Tigerstar did not respond, merely fixing her with that baleful amber gaze.

"May we speak in private?" Tawnypelt asked, when the silence had stretched out for too long.

Tigerstar let out a grunt and turned to pace stiff-legged into his den. His fur still bristled, and a low growl came from his throat, almost as if he were heading into battle.

Tawnypelt followed. *This is going to be bad.*

Inside the den, Tigerstar sat down in his nest and let his gaze rake over Tawnypelt, where she stood by the entrance. "I'm glad you're alive and unharmed," he informed her coldly. "It would have broken my heart to lose another parent without having the chance to say goodbye."

Even though Tigerstar kept any trace of sorrow out of his tone, Tawnypelt knew how deeply he had grieved when he had heard of Rowanclaw's death. She softened as she listened, trying to force down the guilt that began rising within her. She remembered how furious she had been with her own kits when they ran into unnecessary danger, snarling at them and cuffing them over the ear with claws sheathed, just because she loved them so much.

"Now that I know you're okay," Tigerstar went on, "I can let myself be angry. I could have used your presence and advice around here in the last few days, but you weren't here. You were shirking your duties, Tawnypelt. Am I to take that as a sign that you've chosen ThunderClan over ShadowClan?"

Tawnypelt's guilt was swallowed up in indignation. "Of course not!" she protested. "I admit I was annoyed when you told me to be back within two sunrises. My brother is very ill! He needs me to be with him."

"I'm sorry about Brambleclaw," Tigerstar admitted. "I've always respected him. And I understand that you could feel split loyalties at a time like this."

"Then why—"

Tigerstar went on speaking as if Tawnypelt hadn't interrupted. "But it makes me wonder whether you still want to be a ShadowClan cat or not. This feels like something we need to decide. Don't you agree?" he finished, narrowing his eyes as he stared at Tawnypelt. "Or do you think it's okay to show me so much disrespect?"

Tawnypelt suppressed a shiver at her son's challenging tone. "Until now, I've never doubted where I belong, not since I first left ThunderClan to join my father here. But . . ."

"But what?" Tigerstar demanded with a single lash of his tail.

Tawnypelt took a deep breath. "Your behavior since I received my prophecy has made me wonder about my place here. You haven't taken me seriously. You haven't even tried to work out what the prophecy might mean!"

A quivering silence fell between the two cats. Tigerstar looked taken aback, as if he hadn't been expecting that answer and wasn't sure how to react.

After several heartbeats had dragged by, Tawnypelt suggested, "Maybe we should discuss this another time. Right now, I need to speak to Oakfur."

“Oakfur?” Tigerstar sounded confused at the sudden change of subject. “Why?”

“I want to talk to all the elders,” Tawnypelt explained. Mentioning the prophecy had reminded her that she still hadn’t finished the task she had undertaken. “I want them to tell me about their dreams.”

Tigerstar dug his claws deep into the thick layer of moss and bracken that made up his nest. *“Why?”* he repeated.

“I think it may help us to find the new Moonpool.” Tawnypelt did her best to keep her tone calm and reasonable in the face of her son’s surging irritation. “Or whatever will take the place of the Moonpool.”

Tigerstar stared at her, growing disbelief in his amber eyes. “Do you remember what all the *Clan leaders* agreed?” he asked, shaking his head. “That we would wait for two moons before worrying about the Moonpool? Or do you have so many bees buzzing around in your brain that you can’t hear what any cat tells you?”

“Yes, I remember.” Ignoring the insult, Tawnypelt met his gaze unflinchingly. “And I believe that was a mistake.”

The words were out before she could stop herself, and Tigerstar responded before she could assure him that she didn’t mean to show disrespect.

“You forget yourself, Tawnypelt.” His voice was cool, even. “Very well, this is what you will do. If you want to remain a ShadowClan cat, you are forbidden from bothering Oakfur or getting these bee-brained ideas into the heads of the other warriors. If you’re intent on pursuing this ridiculous, juvenile project away from ShadowClan, then I suppose I can’t stop you. But I would much rather see you spending your time being a loyal ShadowClan warrior.”

Is he saying that I’m not *loyal?*

For a moment Tawnypelt found herself looking at Tigerstar as his mother, the cat who had raised him from a tiny kit, mewling in the nursery. Instinctively she felt it was wrong for her son to be so dismissive of her—wrong and hurtful. *Why doesn’t he trust me?*

But the longer Tawnypelt stared at him, seeing the imperious, impassive gaze he aimed back at her, the more she felt her motherly feelings swamped by rising anger. She refused to stand there being belittled for a heartbeat longer. “Fine!” she snapped, spinning around and stalking out of the den.

Tawnypelt headed across the camp and sank into her own nest in the warriors' den, curling up with her paws over her ears. The stress of the discussion with Tigerstar had driven off her exhaustion. Now she feigned sleep so she could ponder Tigerstar's order without being interrupted.

He said he wanted her to be a loyal ShadowClan warrior. And part of Tawnypelt could understand that. Any Clan leader would want his warriors to be loyal, so that the Clan would remain secure.

Tawnypelt's first reaction was to prove her loyalty by throwing herself into her ShadowClan duties: to be the first cat to volunteer for patrols; to bring back as much prey as she could carry for the fresh-kill pile; to inspire and help the younger cats and make her son proud of her. ShadowClan, she knew, was where she truly belonged, and she wanted to do everything she could to keep it strong.

But Tawnypelt also knew that if a terrible fate befell all the Clans, it did no good if only one of them was strong. She reflected that, in a way, Tigerstar had given her permission to continue with her "ridiculous project" among the other Clans. He might not have meant it exactly like that, but if he blamed her later, she could always retort, *But you told me I should!*

It was more of a problem that he had threatened her with exile if she spoke to Oakfur or spread her ideas among the cats of her own Clan.

However, Tigerstar would *have to* forgive her if she found a replacement for the Moonpool and restored the link with StarClan so that all the Clans would have the guidance of their warrior ancestors once more.

I need to go back to ThunderClan and be with Brambleclaw again, she decided.

But before that, she would visit SkyClan, so that she could speak with the elders there: Fallowfern, Cherrytail, and Sparrowpelt. With knowledge gathered through so many seasons, surely they would be able to set Tawnypelt's paws on the right path. While she was there, it would be good to catch up with Leafstar and Birchfeather, too.

And as for Oakfur? Tawnypelt mused. *I'll just have to figure out a way to talk to him.*

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Chapter Six

Wrinkling her nose at the reek of mouse bile, Moonpaw dabbed her scrap of soaked moss carefully at a tick on Cloudtail's back. This was the task she hated most as an apprentice; she always felt that however often she washed her paws, she would never get the stink off. But offering to do tick duty was the only way she could get out of clearing up the warriors' den with Goldenpaw and Shinepaw.

Moonpaw didn't mind clearing out the dens, but she was determined to avoid Goldenpaw, as she had for the last few days, ever since she had growled at Morningkit that she was the cause of all her problems. Goldenpaw had thought she was speaking to him, and Moonpaw knew that if he got her alone, he was going to ask her for an explanation. She still didn't know what she could say. The very thought of it was making her anxious.

"Ouch!" Cloudtail let out a cry of pain. "What do you think you're doing?"

Moonpaw realized that along with the tick, she had pulled out one of Cloudtail's long white hairs. "I'm so sorry!" she gasped.

"Mouse-brained apprentice!" Cloudtail complained. "Be more careful, can't you?"

Brightheart stretched out a paw from where she was curled up in her nest beside her mate. "She's doing her best," she purred soothingly. "Don't be so grumpy."

"You would be grumpy if your fur was torn out," Cloudtail huffed. "Go on." He waved his tail at Moonpaw. "Get out of here."

“I’m done anyway,” Moonpaw mewed, gathering the debris of soaked moss and dead ticks into a large leaf before scrambling out of the elders’ den.

She was so distracted because she had upset Cloudtail that she didn’t look where she was going. As she emerged into the open, she stumbled straight into another cat. “Sorry!” she exclaimed, dropping her leaf wrap and taking a hasty step backward.

“There you are!” the other cat meowed.

Properly looking at the cat’s golden tabby fur for the first time, Moonpaw realized that the worst had happened. The cat she had collided with was Goldenpaw.

Her fellow apprentice was gazing at her with a mixture of concern and amusement. “I really think we need to have a talk in private, don’t you?” he asked.

Moonpaw wanted to think of an excuse, but her mind was empty of words. Every hair on her pelt was hot with confusion as she scrabbled to collect the scraps that had fallen out of the leaf wrap. “I—I don’t know,” she mewed at last.

“I know you’ve been avoiding me,” Goldenpaw went on, “and it has to stop. I just want to talk.”

Moonpaw had to accept that there was no getting out of this. “Okay,” she responded reluctantly. “I have to take this stuff out of camp and wash the mouse bile off my paws. You can come with me if you like.”

She headed for the thorn tunnel with Goldenpaw padding along at her shoulder. Once they were outside the camp, away from prying eyes and ears, she scattered her debris and bent to clean her paws in a small pool.

“What do you want to talk about?” she muttered ungraciously.

“You know perfectly well.” Goldenpaw’s voice was calm, even kind. “That day when you were changing the elders’ bedding. You said that I was the cause of all your problems, and I don’t think that’s true. I don’t know what you were talking about, but you seemed very upset.” He paused; then, when Moonpaw didn’t respond, he added, “Whatever it is, does it have anything to do with why you can’t sleep?”

Moonpaw hesitated. Goldenpaw seemed so sympathetic; could she really tell him the truth?

“Come on.” Goldenpaw prodded her shoulder gently with his nose. “If you wash your paws any more, they’ll drop off. Tell me what’s bothering

you.”

Moonpaw drew back from the pool, shaking the water off each forepaw in turn. “I could tell you, but if I did, you’d think I had bees in my brain.”

“You said I was the cause of all your problems,” Goldenpaw repeated, “and I can’t make sense of that. But you had your back to me. It sounded like you were talking to some other cat, but you were alone. What’s going on, Moonpaw?”

He’s guessed almost all of it, Moonpaw realized. *I have to tell him the rest.*

“I *was* talking to another cat,” she confessed. “She’s Morningkit, my sister who died when she was only a few days old. She speaks to me in my mind, and sometimes I can see her, like her reflection in the lake. She won’t leave me alone.”

Goldenpaw was staring at her; Moonpaw braced herself. *Either he won’t believe me, or he’ll think I’m weird.*

Then she saw that the look in Goldenpaw’s eyes was wonder, not disbelief. “How long has this been going on?” he asked.

“Since I was a kit,” Moonpaw replied. “At first I thought every cat had a voice inside their head. And when I found out they didn’t, I had to keep quiet about it. Enough cats think I’m odd as it is, because of my face.” She touched a forepaw to the place where black fur gave way to orange.

“Great StarClan, Moonpaw!” Goldenpaw breathed out the words. “You’ve been carrying this secret all your life? How brave is that!” Moonpaw barely had time to react to the unexpected praise before he continued. “This explains a lot, and I have so many questions, but let’s stick to what happened in the elders’ den. You were speaking to Morningkit?”

Moonpaw nodded. “She was being so horrible. She told me that no cat in the Clan trusted me, and that I should leave.”

“Well, that’s a load of bat droppings,” Goldenpaw meowed firmly. “*I* trust you, for one.”

Moonpaw stared at him, stunned. “Really? You’re not horrified that I’m talking to a cat no other cat can see? You don’t think there’s something wrong with me?”

Goldenpaw curled his tail up in amusement and nudged Moonpaw’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t go that far. I’m only joking,” he added hastily as Moonpaw narrowed her eyes at him. “Seriously, I would be lying if I told

you that Shinepaw and I hadn't noticed that something isn't right with you. But now that I know what's been going on, I completely get why you aren't able to sleep and why you're trying so hard to keep busy." He rested his tail briefly on Moonpaw's shoulder. "I'm not sure how you've been coping with this on your own," he told her, admiration in his voice. "I can't imagine having a voice in my head, talking to me whether I want it to or not. How are you holding up?"

Moonpaw was touched that her fellow apprentice seemed to be genuinely concerned about her. "I've been doing better, thanks to Jayfeather and Brambleclaw," she responded. "But lately, Morningkit has changed. She's been somehow stranger . . . more aggressive. She wants me to spend all my time with her, and I just can't! I'm a ThunderClan apprentice, and I have duties. But she won't stop, and to be honest, I'm not sure what to do about it."

"Maybe you should tell Squirrelstar and Ivypool," Goldenpaw suggested.

Moonpaw took a pace back, horrified at the thought. "I don't know how they would react," she protested. "They're both such strong, capable cats. They might think that I'm a burden to the Clan, and that's the last thing I want."

Goldenpaw nodded slowly. "I don't think they would," he murmured, "but I understand how you feel. I promise I'll keep your secret . . . from every cat except one."

"One cat?" Moonpaw wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. "Which one?"

"I have an idea," he reassured her.

A couple of days after Moonpaw's confession to Goldenpaw, she was finishing her final task, sorting through new bedding for the nursery, making sure there were no thorns or sharp twigs that might hurt the kits.

Warm gratitude flowed through her as she thought about her two fellow apprentices. Goldenpaw had revealed her secret to his sister, Shinepaw, and to Moonpaw's relief, she was understanding too.

"Now all your behavior makes sense," she had meowed cheerfully to Moonpaw. "That makes everything a *lot* easier!"

Ever since she had confided in them, Morningkit had been much quieter, so that Moonpaw could give all her mind to her duties. Sunbeam had even

praised her renewed focus during hunting patrols and battle practice.

When Moonpaw had delivered the bedding to the nursery, she was able to return to her own den, bounding across the shadowy stone hollow where most of the cats had already settled down for the night.

Slipping through the ferns that covered the entrance to the den, Moonpaw found Goldenpaw and Shinepaw already waiting for her. Her nest had been newly fluffed up, squashed between the other two.

"Come on, Moonpaw," Shinepaw mewed. "In you get, all cozy between us two."

The three young cats had been sleeping like this every night, close together so that if Moonpaw awoke, the others would wake with her.

As she curled into her nest, Moonpaw couldn't help noticing that Goldenpaw and Shinepaw both looked a little tired. A guilty pang thrilled through her; she was sorry they felt they had to look after her as though she were a kit.

The previous nights hadn't been easy, Moonpaw knew. A few times she had risen and tried to walk in her sleep, and though neither of her friends had complained, Moonpaw had realized that she often babbled senselessly while she was still unconscious.

"Good night," she murmured drowsily, feeling Goldenpaw and Shinepaw settling down on either side of her. *And StarClan grant that we have a quiet night.*

"Shinepaw and I are going hunting," Goldenpaw announced when the three apprentices woke the next morning. "Do you want to come, Moonpaw?"

Moonpaw felt so much better after a restful night. "I'd love to, if Sunbeam says I can," she responded eagerly.

"All our mentors are doing the dawn patrol," Shinepaw assured her. "Flipclaw just dropped in to tell us. We're free for a bit."

Following her denmates out into the open, Moonpaw shivered in the dawn chill and shook the debris from her bedding out of her pelt. The sky was growing lighter, and she could make out wisps of cloud outlined against the gray. When the sun came up, it would be a lovely day.

An unfamiliar energy was coursing through Moonpaw; she wanted to run and leap and tumble about in the crisp fallen leaves that drifted over the forest floor.

But that's not how you catch prey, she reminded herself.

Across the camp, Ivypool was assigning hunting patrols; soon the cats she had named were streaming out through the thorn tunnel. Dewnose, who had been on watch, yawned, stretched, and headed for his den.

"Let's go," Goldenpaw urged the others. "I know a good spot."

"Just as long as the other patrols don't get there first," Shinepaw meowed.

Moonpaw followed the others out of the camp and down toward the lake. Soon Shinepaw halted beside a bramble thicket that was surrounded by hazel saplings and thick clumps of fern.

Raising his head, he sniffed the air. "No cats nearby, but plenty of prey," he reported.

Moonpaw's pads tingled with expectation. Tasting the air, she picked up the scent of squirrel; a moment later she spotted it at the edge of the bramble thicket. It was nibbling something held in its paws, completely oblivious to the three cats.

"Look!" she whispered, angling her ears toward the squirrel.

"Well spotted!" Goldenpaw breathed in response.

Moonpaw guessed that the squirrel might escape by diving into the thicket or by climbing one of the nearby trees. Goldenpaw obviously agreed; he gestured with his tail for Moonpaw to crouch among the roots of an oak tree and sent Shinepaw a little farther away to the foot of a tall ash.

When they were in position, Goldenpaw began to creep slowly toward the squirrel, which was still unaware of its approaching danger. He edged forward, paw step by paw step, with his belly fur almost brushing the ground.

That's great stalking, Moonpaw thought.

But before Goldenpaw was within pouncing range, he stumbled, one forepaw slipping sideways. Something cracked under his paw. Alarmed, the squirrel raised its head, staring straight at him. A heartbeat later it was fleeing toward Moonpaw's oak tree, its tail flowing after it as it ran.

Moonpaw had pressed herself down among the oak roots, and as the squirrel approached, she leaped out, letting out a fearsome growl. One of her forepaws brushed the squirrel's foreleg, but it dodged away before she could get a grip.

The squirrel headed for Shinepaw's ash tree, but it spotted her while it was still a few fox-lengths away. Shinepaw hurled herself toward it; doubling back on itself, the squirrel dashed straight into Goldenpaw's paws. Its cry of alarm was cut off when Goldenpaw killed it with a swift bite to the throat.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," he panted.

"Great catch!" Moonpaw exclaimed, bounding up to him.

Shinepaw joined them a moment later. "It's a good, plump one," she meowed, looking down at the prey. "Well done," she added, giving Goldenpaw an affectionate lick around his ear.

"Hey, this wasn't just my catch," Goldenpaw protested. "We all did it. We make a fantastic team."

Moonpaw felt warmed through by his words, as if the chilly leaf-bare forest were bathed in the sunshine of greenleaf. She loved being included in a team, when she had always been alone, except for Morningkit. Half expecting mockery from her dead sister, she listened carefully, but Morningkit was silent.

Moonpaw couldn't remember ever having enjoyed anything so much. Even though she respected Sunbeam as her mentor, when they hunted together, Moonpaw was always aware of her scrutiny. Here, with friends, there was none of that pressure to do well. It didn't matter whether she caught something or not.

All the same, I'd like to make a catch.

By this time the sky had grown lighter, and a warm flush from the direction of WindClan territory told the cats that the sun was rising. Moonpaw picked up the scent of cats coming from the other side of the bramble thicket and heard Lionblaze call out, "Let's try over here!"

"Mouse dung," Goldenpaw muttered. "I hoped we could avoid the hunting patrols."

"Let's go down to the lake," Shinepaw suggested.

"Good idea." Grabbing the squirrel, Goldenpaw bounded away, weaving among clumps of undergrowth, with Shinepaw and Moonpaw hard on his paws.

As they broke out of the trees, at the top of the slope that led down to the water's edge, Moonpaw heard a loud honking sound coming from the sky. Looking up, she saw a group of birds flying over the trees in a narrow

wedge shape. The honking came from them as they approached in a shallow dive and landed on the surface of the lake in a flurry of beating wings and churned up water.

Goldenpaw was staring with his mouth open. “What *are* they?” he asked. “They’re huge!”

Shinepaw gave him a prod. “Don’t you remember what Finleap was telling us when he was describing different kinds of prey? About big water birds that only come to the lake in leaf-bare?”

“Yes, you’re right!” Goldenpaw exclaimed. “He said they were called geese.”

Moonpaw gazed wonderingly at the geese, now floating calmly on the lake a few tail-lengths from the shore. Their body feathers were grayish-brown; their necks were black, and they had white chests. As she watched, one of them upended itself into the water, so that only its rump and tail were visible. She let out a little *mrrow* of amusement.

“If Finleap said they’re prey,” Goldenpaw mused, “we should be able to catch one.” He swiped his tongue around his jaws as if he were tasting something delicious. “One of those would feed the whole Clan.”

“And how do you suppose we catch one?” Shinepaw asked, a sarcastic edge to her voice. “Swim out to it? I’ll leave that to RiverClan cats, thank you.”

While she was speaking, Moonpaw noticed that one of the geese had waddled out of the water a little farther along the shore. Its black webbed feet slapped the ground until it halted and began tugging at something among the pebbles.

She touched Goldenpaw on the shoulder with her tail and angled her ears in the direction of the goose. Goldenpaw caught his breath; Moonpaw could feel his muscles tensing.

“Okay.” Goldenpaw spoke in a rapid undertone. “I’m going to get between it and the water. You two wait here and be ready to leap on it if it heads for the undergrowth.”

“But you’ve forgotten—” Moonpaw began.

However, Goldenpaw was already creeping around in a wide circle, heading for the stretch of shore between the goose and the water.

“—that it can fly,” Shinepaw finished.

The two she-cats exchanged a glance and shrugged.

At first it looked as if Goldenpaw's plan might succeed. He got into position without alerting the goose. Pausing briefly, he gathered himself into the hunter's crouch and took off in a massive leap. He collided with the goose, but Moonpaw could see he had completely underestimated its size and how difficult it would be to kill.

The goose took off, flapping its wings and honking loudly. As it lifted into the air, it thrust Goldenpaw backward into the shallow water at the edge of the lake, where he thrashed around in a tangle of paws and tail. One single feather drifted down.

Shinepaw curled her tail up in amusement. Moonpaw tried hard to suppress spurts of laughter, but it was quite impossible, though she ran down to the water's edge and steadied Goldenpaw as he scrambled back onto dry land.

The goose, meanwhile, had circled around and landed on the lake again, where it floated serenely and let out a single honk, as if it were mocking the cats.

"Fox dung!" Goldenpaw snarled.

Moonpaw jumped back as the golden tabby tom shook himself, scattering water droplets.

"I think we should head back to camp," Shinepaw suggested, padding down to the water's edge to join them. "You need to dry off, Goldenpaw. Besides, our mentors will be wondering where we are."

"I suppose . . . ," Goldenpaw meowed reluctantly. "But we've only caught one squirrel."

"We can hunt on the way back," Shinepaw responded, her firm tone not giving her brother any room to argue. She stamped on the ground with one forepaw. "We have to go *now*."

Why is she so insistent? Moonpaw wondered.

"Okay, you win." Goldenpaw narrowed his eyes and stared at his sister, then at Moonpaw. "But if any cat tells the Clan about that goose . . ."

Shinepaw led the way up the slope; Goldenpaw collected his squirrel, and all three cats headed into the undergrowth at the edge of the forest. As ferns closed over her head, Moonpaw heard a faint scrabbling sound close by; pausing, she tasted the air and picked up the scent of vole.

Her denmates were drawing ahead of her. Moonpaw didn't dare call out to them, in case she alerted the prey. Instead, she pinpointed the vole by

sound and scent and flattened herself to the ground, trying not to set the fern stems waving as she crept closer.

Heartbeats later she spotted the creature slipping through the undergrowth toward the lake, as if it was on its way to its den. Moonpaw didn't have much time; if she waited to achieve a perfect hunter's crouch, it would be gone.

Instead, she pushed off with her hind paws and stretched out her forepaws as she sprang. Her claws sank into the vole and she dragged it struggling toward her until it was close enough that she could bite its throat. It was fat and juicy; Moonpaw's jaws watered at the thought of tearing into its flesh. Her belly felt empty after setting out so early.

Once she had killed it, Moonpaw thanked StarClan for the prey and set off after the other apprentices. As she emerged into a clearing, she spotted both cats looking around as if they were wondering where she was.

"Moonpaw!" Goldenpaw called. "Moonpaw, where—"

He broke off as Moonpaw padded toward him, her head high as she carried her vole.

"Wow, look at that!" he exclaimed, bounding up to Moonpaw. "Great job!" His gaze grew warm as he bent toward her and touched his muzzle to her shoulder. "You're going to be a fantastic hunter."

Moonpaw dipped her head, embarrassed by his praise. His scent wreathed around her, even swamping the scent of the vole. She wanted to press herself against his side and feel his strength.

I hope you're not falling in love with Goldenpaw. To Moonpaw's horror, Morningkit's voice broke in on the precious moment, thin and envious. *He doesn't really care about you. No cat does, except for me.*

Go away! Moonpaw responded. She was so furious she couldn't help stiffening and letting out a growl, then gave her pelt a shake as she spotted the curious, concerned look Goldenpaw was giving her. *I'm not listening to you*, she added to Morningkit.

On the way back to camp, Shinepaw caught a mouse, so all three cats had prey to carry when they padded through the thorn tunnel. Moonpaw's heart throbbed with pride to be bringing back fresh-kill for her Clan.

But when Moonpaw emerged into the camp, she halted in bewilderment, her pride draining away. A half circle of cats stood waiting for them: Squirrelstar was in the center, with Alderheart and Jayfeather beside her. Moonpaw's mentor, Sunbeam, was there too, along with her parents, Bayshine and Thriftear, and Daisy and Myrtlebloom from the nursery.

At first Moonpaw struggled to convince herself that the cats were there to congratulate the three of them on a successful hunt. But she couldn't ignore the grim concern in their eyes, nor the way they were all staring at her, not at her companions.

"Moonpaw, I've gathered these cats here because we need to speak to you," Squirrelstar announced.

Taken aback, Moonpaw turned a questioning look on Goldenpaw, but she saw no answering surprise in the golden tabby's eyes, only guilt that told Moonpaw he hadn't kept his promise to tell no cat but Shinepaw. Shinepaw wasn't surprised either. She took Moonpaw's vole from her; the two apprentices carried all the prey to the fresh-kill pile, then joined the other cats in the circle.

A tide of misery spread through Moonpaw from ears to tail-tip at the realization that she had been betrayed. Goldenpaw and Shinepaw had obviously known the other cats would be waiting; that was why Shinepaw had been so determined to get back. Perhaps that was why they had asked her to go hunting, so the others could get ready. They hadn't really wanted her with them at all.

See? There was mockery in Morningkit's voice. *I told you they weren't really your friends. You can't trust any cat here. Only me!*

Now that she was facing her Clanmates on her own, Moonpaw felt every hair on her pelt begin to rise with fear. She had never had to report to Squirrelstar before; she thought her legs would hardly hold her up once she was fixed by that intense green gaze.

Turning her head, she shot a hard glance at Goldenpaw, who was standing at the end of the circle only a couple of tail-lengths away from her. "You told them, didn't you?" she mewed.

Goldenpaw's head drooped in shame. "I had to," he whispered. "I helped as much as I could, and so did Shinepaw, but we can't go on like that forever. We can't sleep at night, because we're watching out for you. I was wrong to think that we could cope with it by ourselves. What you've been dealing with is too big a problem for the three of us to solve."

Moonpaw felt utterly desolate. “You promised. . . .”

“I know, but I really think it’s best that you tell Squirrelstar everything,” Goldenpaw responded. “Then the whole Clan can help you.”

Jayfeather, whose acute hearing had obviously picked up their words, took a step forward. His voice was kind as he spoke to Moonpaw. “Whatever it is, we’ll face it as a Clan.”

He’s lying! Morningkit hissed.

Moonpaw felt she had no choice now; she had to tell her Clanmates the truth. But weariness fell upon her like a smothering pelt, and she wasn’t even sure that she could find the words.

Are they going to exile me from the Clan?

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Chapter Seven

Several days had passed since Starlingpaw had last seen Crowfeather's spirit walking among their sleeping Clanmates. Exhausted by nights of watching, he had finally given in to sleep. And even though he could see and hear the spirit when he was awake, nothing disturbed him sleeping.

Meanwhile, the questing cats remained in their makeshift camp in the ravine. They couldn't move on until Crowfeather regained consciousness, but they were all heartily sick of the bleak landscape, the shortage of prey, and their anxiety about what might be happening in their Clans while they were stuck here.

One day, just after sunhigh, Starlingpaw was returning from a hunting patrol with Ivypool and Duskfur. He had caught a blackbird; the other cats had prey, too, but it wouldn't be enough to fill their bellies when it was shared out among them all.

As they made their way down the cliff face and entered the ravine, Starlingpaw could see Fidgetflake and Shadowsight once more bending over Crowfeather's motionless form, trickling water from a moss ball into his mouth and encouraging him to swallow. He felt his muscles tense as he wondered whether the worst had happened and Crowfeather had died.

At the sound of the patrol's paw steps, Fidgetflake looked up. "Good news!" he announced cheerfully.

Thank StarClan! Starlingpaw thought, relaxing in relief. *We certainly need some.*

“You mean he’s waking up?” Ivypool mumbled around her mouthful of mouse.

Fidgetflake shook his head. “His pulse is steady and his breathing stronger. He seems much better. But he still hasn’t regained consciousness.”

“And we have to wait here until he does,” Shadowsight added.

Ivypool let out a disappointed grunt and went to deposit her prey on the meager fresh-kill pile. Starlingpaw followed; his anxiety about Crowfeather allayed for a while, his thoughts returned to the prophecy.

A deceiver who might walk a dark path . . .

Once again he wondered whether that cat was also the one spoken of in Tawnypelt’s prophecy, the cat with a paw in two worlds. That could refer to Crowfeather himself; he had fought against Ashfur in the Dark Forest.

Every hair on Starlingpaw’s pelt itched to find out more. He might be able to do that if he could speak to Crowfeather’s embodied spirit. And that would mean staying awake to see if the spirit would emerge.

For a few heartbeats Starlingpaw hesitated. On the previous nights when he had seen the glowing shape, he had been too afraid to speak to it. Why should this time be any different?

Then Starlingpaw took a deep breath, bracing himself. *You’re a Clan cat,* he told himself. *You’re going to be a warrior. Not some shivering little mouse. Bring it on!*

Before he could change his mind, he padded up to Fidgetflake. “May I watch over Crowfeather tonight?” he asked. “I want to make up for falling asleep last time.”

The medicine cat gave him a doubtful look. “I’m not sure I can trust you . . . ,” he mewed.

“Please!” Starlingpaw stared up beseechingly into Fidgetflake’s eyes, as if an eager look could convince the medicine cat of how reliable he was.

It seemed to work. After a moment, Fidgetflake nodded slowly. “Very well,” he declared. “You can keep watch tonight. But if you feel you’re going to fall asleep, you wake one of us up, okay?”

Starlingpaw nodded. “I won’t fall asleep,” he meowed confidently. “But if I think I might, I promise I’ll call some cat.”

The last streaks of sunlight still remained in the sky, but deep shadows lay in the ravine. As the other cats settled into their nests, Starlingpaw began pacing back and forth near Crowfeather. His ears were pricked, his

senses alert for the least sign of stirring from the WindClan tom. The movement, the concentration, kept him awake and helped him to think.

To begin with, Starlingpaw had believed that Tawnypelt's prophecy must have been about Fidgetflake. But he had been wrong. This time, he was determined not to pass judgment so quickly. He would be patient and find out everything he could first.

Darkness deepened, and one by one the warriors of StarClan appeared overhead. Starlingpaw began to feel that nothing would happen, that he would end the night with no more information than when he had started. Patience, he reflected, wasn't easy when he was so desperate to learn what Crowfeather could tell him.

Pacing away from the unconscious cat, Starlingpaw became aware of a faint glimmer a few tail-lengths ahead. As he stared, he saw the rocks in the ravine gradually grow brighter, and his own shadow was thrown out in front of him, long and leggy. Briefly he froze, then whirled around to see Crowfeather's shimmering spirit rise from his unconscious body.

Swiftly Starlingpaw slipped behind the nearest boulder, peering out to watch what the spirit did. He still meant to speak to it, but he wanted to listen first.

Just as on previous nights, the spirit moved among the sleeping cats, approaching them one by one. Pausing beside a snoring Shadowsight, he stared down at him thoughtfully.

"Could it be you?" he asked. "Are you the cat Stoneteller warned me about?" The spirit raised his head, as if he was looking at something Starlingpaw couldn't see. "Maybe it all fits together with Tawnypelt's prophecy about a cat with a paw in two worlds," he added.

Starlingpaw wondered if the spirit would accuse Shadowsight, but as he finished speaking he turned away and padded to Fidgetflake's side. "It's true of you, as well," he mewed. "All medicine cats regularly commune with StarClan, and they get visons from their ancestors. Maybe that's what it means to have a paw in two worlds."

The spirit gazed down at Fidgetflake for a moment longer, then skirted the medicine cat's nest to stand beside Ivypool. The ThunderClan deputy was sleeping curled up, a pale mound of fur reflecting the spirit's silver glow. "You too," he murmured. "You once trained in the Dark Forest, spying for ThunderClan when the starless warriors threatened the Clans."

The spirit turned his head to and fro, lashing his tail and seeming more and more agitated. “Great StarClan!” he exclaimed. “For all I know, the prophecy could apply to any cat here!”

“Including you,” Starlingpaw thought.

Too late, he realized that he had said the words out loud. Crowfeather’s spirit whipped around and gasped as he spotted Starlingpaw peering out at him from behind the boulder.

Their gazes locked. Both cats, the living and the spirit, were so stunned that neither of them spoke another word.

Moments dragged past, until Starlingpaw felt he had been standing motionless for at least a season, staring at the glowing shape with the darkness of the ravine all around him.

At last Starlingpaw opened his jaws, resolved not to let this opportunity pass, even though he had no idea what he was going to say. But before he could croak out a single word, he noticed that the spirit was fading.

He’s not going back to Crowfeather’s body! Panic thrummed through Starlingpaw from ears to tail-tip. *Have I killed him?*

When the spirit had diminished to little more than a wisp of glittering mist, he seemed to curl on himself and dart down the ravine to where his body lay, leaving Starlingpaw to stand rigid in the glimmering starlight. He couldn’t tell whether the spirit had entered Crowfeather’s body or not. His panic gave way to sorrow for the loss of such a noble warrior, but also because now he would never know the truth about the prophecy.

The sound of a cough startled him from his paralysis. Crowfeather’s body shifted slightly. The cough was followed by a low groan.

Stumbling in his haste, Starlingpaw bounded across the ravine to Crowfeather’s body. The WindClan deputy’s eyes were open, and he was feebly trying to sit up.

“I—I’ll get help!” Starlingpaw stammered.

The shock of seeing me must have woken him! he realized as he dashed over to the medicine cats’ nests.

Starlingpaw dug his paws hard into Fidgetflake’s shoulder fur and shook him. “Wake up! Wake up!” he yowled.

Fidgetflake woke with a start, giving Starlingpaw a baleful stare. “What in StarClan’s name—?”

“Crowfeather has woken up!” Starlingpaw gasped out.

“What?” Fidgetflake scrambled to his paws, giving Shadowsight a prod in the belly as he did so.

He bounded across the ravine to Crowfeather’s side; Starlingpaw followed, along with a yawning Shadowsight.

As Starlingpaw reached the WindClan cat, he saw that Crowfeather’s eyes were unfocused, so it was hard to tell whether he was fully aware of his surroundings or if he remembered anything he had seen or heard while he was in his spirit form.

Does he know that he saw me watching him? Starlingpaw asked himself. He shook his head. *I don’t know.*

But what Starlingpaw did know was that Crowfeather was keeping secrets. He was suspicious of all the other questing cats, even if he would never admit it out loud. Starlingpaw was suspicious of them too, but at the top of his list was Crowfeather himself.

I have to figure all this out, Starlingpaw vowed, *before any harm comes to my Clan.*

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Chapter Eight

Furry bodies jostled Tawnypelt as she gazed up into a tall ash tree at the edge of the SkyClan camp. In her anxiety she dug her claws hard into the ground, watching Birchfeather as he moved cautiously and confidently along a high branch. The squirrel he was stalking seemed to be warily observing the crowd of cats on the ground, unaware of the one cat who was creeping up on him.

"SkyClan was always the best at jumping," Hawkwing, the SkyClan deputy, explained to Tawnypelt. "Back in the gorge, we used to hunt along the cliff paths and in the trees. We're more mixed now, but we still honor SkyClan's ancestors. That's why Leafstar and I chose this trial for Birchfeather. He has to catch three pieces of prey among the trees without touching the ground."

"It's a great idea," Tawnypelt agreed. "And I know he's so grateful that you and Leafstar changed your minds and decided to move forward with his trials."

Hawkwing nodded, sighing. "Well, it seems the Moonpool won't be accessible any time soon," he said. "No point in punishing Birchfeather and Ridgeglow for Twoleg foolishness."

Although Leafstar had decided to step down from leadership, she couldn't give her remaining lives back to StarClan, because Twolegs had barricaded the Moonpool. Meanwhile, she and her deputy were working together. It was an awkward situation, but as far as Tawnypelt could see, they were making a success of it.

Tawnypelt knew that Birchfeather had been frustrated that his trials had been delayed while the SkyClan cats decided on their leadership. But now Leafstar and Hawkwing were keen to move Birchfeather along until he was a full SkyClan warrior.

Maybe they're afraid they'll lose an excellent young warrior if they don't stop dithering around.

She was glad that the leaders had given her permission to stay in SkyClan for a few days. She loved being there to support her young kin in his decision to leave ShadowClan because of his love for the SkyClan warrior Ridgeglow. Besides, Tawnypelt wasn't sure where to go now, except that for a while, at least, it wouldn't be back home.

Tawnypelt felt a twinge around her heart at the thought of ShadowClan. Tigerstar had no idea that she was living in the SkyClan camp. He had made it clear to her that if she wanted to remain a ShadowClan cat, she would have to abandon her project of visiting the elders.

I*f he really meant that, I suppose I'm Clanless now.* A desperate sadness welled up inside her at the idea of not belonging anywhere, but she resolutely thrust it down.

At least Leafstar and Hawkwing had welcomed her, especially after she explained to them how she wanted to draw on the wisdom of the elders.

Now, pushing her problems aside like a thorny twig in her nest, Tawnypelt concentrated on what was happening up in the ash tree.

Birchfeather was almost within pouncing distance of the squirrel, which still had no idea he was there. But as he crept forward, he brushed against a thin branch that still had a few leaves clinging to it. The branch swayed, the leaves made a rustling sound, and the squirrel, alarmed, leaped up into a fork of the tree trunk.

A gasp went up from the crowd of cats below. Birchfeather let out a yowl of frustration and hurled himself after the squirrel, clamping his jaws onto the end of its tail. There was a brief struggle; the squirrel scrabbled at the bark to pull itself free. Then Birchfeather dragged it down and raked his claws across its throat.

"One!" he called out as he tossed the body down to the ground. "Thank you, StarClan, for this prey."

Murmurs of admiration passed through the crowd of cats at the foot of the tree, while Birchfeather glanced around, looking for his next quarry.

Tawnypelt spotted Ridgeglow a couple of tail-lengths away, her white nose quivering with anxiety as she watched the cat she hoped would be her mate.

A pang of sympathy pierced Tawnypelt's chest. This was Birchfeather's third and last trial; it must be putting immense pressure on both young cats. If Birchfeather failed, he would have to leave Ridgeglow and return to ShadowClan. Tigerstar and Dovewing would be pleased to have their son back again, but as much as Tawnypelt missed him, she couldn't hope for that; it would cause too much unhappiness for Birchfeather and Ridgeglow.

Now Birchfeather had spotted another squirrel, but it was climbing up the trunk of an oak tree a few fox-lengths away from the ash where he still stood. Paw step by paw step he made his way along a branch that jutted out in the direction of the oak. Tawnypelt's heart leaped into her throat as Birchfeather came to the end of the branch and pushed off with powerful hind legs. He sailed through the air, made a neat landing on the nearest oak branch, and dived for the trunk above the squirrel. When it climbed up to his level, he was waiting for it.

"Two!" he yowled as he threw the second body down to the waiting cats.

Tawnypelt spotted Ridgeglow gazing up into the tree with all her love for Birchfeather in her eyes. She wished she could send the young cat a comforting thought. *He's so close now!*

Birchfeather crouched in the shadow of the oak trunk, scanning the trees around him for his last piece of prey. Tawnypelt couldn't see anything moving up there; maybe, she thought, all the creatures had realized that there was a skillful predator around and were heading to safety elsewhere.

The cats gathered at the foot of the tree were beginning to mutter impatiently, while Ridgeglow had her face buried in her mother Blossomheart's shoulder.

"Great StarClan, where has all the prey gone?" Hawkwing murmured at Tawnypelt's side.

Suddenly Tawnypelt heard a flutter of wings and spotted a blackbird landing on a branch just above Birchfeather's head. The young tom had heard it too. He looked up, then gathered himself to spring, and snagged the blackbird in one foreclaw.

But, focused on the catch, Birchfeather had lost his paw hold on the tree. He got a better grip on the blackbird by grasping it in his jaws, but for a few heartbeats he wasn't holding on to anything. Gasps of horror came from the watching cats as he started to fall, and Ridgeglow let out a terrified wail.

Tawnypelt's heart jolted as if it were trying to climb out of her throat. "Oh, StarClan, help him!" she whispered.

As he fell, Birchfeather flailed his paws. The cats below gasped in horror. Then he managed to dig the claws of one forepaw into a slender branch. It swayed wildly under his weight. The blackbird, still alive, was beating its wings into his face, so that he couldn't see what he was doing.

Birchfeather hung in the tree for moments that felt like moons to Tawnypelt. Then he must have gripped the blackbird harder, because it suddenly went limp. Without the thrashing wings, Birchfeather was able to grab the branch with his other forepaw and work his way toward the thicker end beside the trunk. Drawing up his hind paws so that he was safely crouched there, he paused for a heartbeat, then threw the blackbird down to the waiting Clan.

"Three!" he yowled triumphantly. "Thank StarClan!"

"Birchfeather! Birchfeather!" His new Clanmates raised their voices in caterwauls of acclamation.

Tawnypelt was torn: She was happy for Birchfeather, but a little sad that now her young kin was no longer a ShadowClan cat. *SkyClan is his home now.*

Birchfeather skimmed down the tree trunk to where Ridgeglow was waiting for him. She pressed herself against his side, and they twined their tails together. Both cats were purring as if they would never stop.

Hawkwing shouldered his way through the excited cats to Birchfeather's side, and Tawnypelt followed him. She felt that she would burst with pride at her young kin's success.

"Well done," Hawkwing meowed as he halted beside Birchfeather. "That was as neat a piece of tree work as I've seen for a long time."

Birchfeather ducked his head, happily embarrassed. "Thanks, Hawkwing," he responded. "But I thought I was finished when I caught that blackbird."

"You did a great job." Tawnypelt touched noses with the young tom. *Tigerstar and Dovewing would be so proud.* She just managed to stop herself from saying the words out loud.

"Come over here to Leafstar," Hawkwing continued.

Turning, Tawnypelt could see that the SkyClan leader was already perched on the Tallstump. Hawkwing led Birchfeather over to her;

Tawnypelt and Ridgeglow followed, and the rest of the SkyClan cats streamed after them.

Leafstar looked down at Birchfeather where he stood at the foot of the Tallstump. “Birchfeather,” she began, “do you renounce your membership of ShadowClan and your loyalty to its leader and deputy, and your Clanmates?”

Birchfeather held his head and his tail high. “I do,” he declared, his voice ringing out across the camp.

Tawnypelt was intrigued. When Fringewhisker had achieved her three tasks and joined ShadowClan, there had been no ceremony, just a welcome from Tigerstar. Leafstar—and maybe the SkyClan medicine cats—must have devised this.

It’s good. All the Clans should do this, she thought, in spite of how much it hurt to hear Birchfeather renounce his connection to his Clan.

Meanwhile, Leafstar continued. “Then I, Leafstar, leader of SkyClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this cat. Though he became a warrior in another Clan, he has proven himself worthy to join SkyClan.” She fixed Birchfeather with a warm amber gaze. “Birchfeather, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your new Clan, even at the cost of your life?”

Once again, there was no uncertainty in Birchfeather’s tone. “I do.”

“Then by the power of StarClan,” Leafstar went on, “I declare you a member of SkyClan, and I welcome you.”

Birchfeather dipped his head in deepest respect, while the cats around him yowled out cries of welcome. “Thank you, Leafstar,” he responded. “I won’t let you down.”

With the ceremony over, Ridgeglow padded up to stand beside Birchfeather, their happy purring almost drowning out the congratulations of the other cats.

In spite of her faint regret that now there was no hope that Birchfeather would ever return to the Clan of his birth, Tawnypelt couldn’t help sharing in their happiness. She remembered how she had felt when she had first fallen in love with Rowanclaw: as if nothing in the world mattered except for him. And as well as his feeling for Ridgeglow, her young kin seemed truly contented among his new Clanmates.

Glancing around at the crowd, Tawnypelt was relieved to see that Starlingpaw was still on the quest to visit the Tribe of Rushing Water. She was sure that the young apprentice meant well, but for some reason he made her feel uneasy, as if ants were crawling through her pelt. He was too eager to claim a connection with her, and she had no idea why.

Now that the trial was over, and without Starlingpaw there to pester her, Tawnypelt was able to concentrate on the reason she was really visiting SkyClan. She needed to speak with Fallowfern, Cherrytail, and Sparrowpelt.

The rest of the Clan dispersed to their dens or to their duties. Tawnypelt padded up to the Tallstump and met Leafstar as the SkyClan leader jumped down.

Leafstar already knew what Tawnypelt intended. “Come with me,” she mewed with a firm nod, gesturing for Tawnypelt to follow her to the elders’ den.

When they arrived at the entrance, the three elders were settling peacefully into their nests. “That was a good bit of stalking,” Sparrowpelt remarked, wriggling into a comfortable spot among the moss and bracken. “Young Birchfeather will do well here.”

“Ridgeglow will make sure of that,” Cherrytail purred, her fondness for her kin clear.

Before they entered the den, Leafstar spoke softly into Tawnypelt’s ear. “Fallowfern is hard of hearing,” she murmured. “But she can hear a bit if you speak slowly and clearly, and if you’re looking directly at her, she can read your face.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” Tawnypelt responded.

“Greetings,” Leafstar meowed, getting Fallowfern’s attention with a wave of her tail. “May we come in?”

“Of course, Leafstar,” Cherrytail replied. “You’re welcome too, Tawnypelt.”

“What can we do for you?” Sparrowpelt asked.

Tawnypelt settled down directly facing Fallowfern, so that the pale brown she-cat could see her while she spoke. “I need your help,” she began, addressing all three elders. “You remember when I had that accident beside the new Twoleg den, and your medicine cats took care of me, here in your camp.”

Fallowfern nodded. “Of course.”

“I almost died,” Tawnypelt continued. “In fact, I went to StarClan, and while I was there, Bluestar gave me a prophecy.”

Cherrytail and Sparrowpelt exchanged a glance. “We heard you spoke about that at the last Gathering,” Cherrytail meowed. “But no cat told us exactly what you said.”

Sparrowpelt snorted. “It sounded like a lot of garbled nonsense to me.”

“Then maybe you didn’t hear the full story,” Tawnypelt meowed, not at all annoyed by the elder’s dismissive tone. *I don’t think I would believe it if I hadn’t heard it from Bluestar.* “That’s why I’m here, to tell you about it and find out what you think.”

“We’d like to hear about it,” Fallowfern responded with a polite dip of her head.

“Yes, not many cats ask us what we think anymore,” Sparrowpelt mewed. “It’s strange, though, giving the prophecy to you instead of a medicine cat or a Clan leader.” He didn’t sound hostile anymore, only confused.

“StarClan has always been mysterious,” Fallowfern pointed out.

“So, tell us what the prophecy was,” Cherrytail mewed, her eyes bright with curiosity. “And why do you need to talk to us about it?”

“Bluestar told me that a great peril is about to fall on the Clans,” Tawnypelt began. “She said—”

Before she could go further, the elders interrupted her, words tumbling out of their mouths.

“Peril?” Sparrowpelt demanded. “What kind of peril?”

“Haven’t we suffered enough?” Cherrytail mewed plaintively.

“Bluestar only told me that the end of an era is approaching,” Tawnypelt explained. “She said that I must be the cat to lead the Clans out of the moonless dark and onto a new path.”

“You?” Sparrowpelt stared at her. “Why you? No offense, Tawnypelt, but you’re not a leader or a medicine cat.”

“No offense taken,” Tawnypelt assured him. “That’s exactly what I wanted to know. But all that Bluestar said was that the eldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot, and we mustn’t lose our way on the journey.”

Fallowfern squeezed her eyes shut. “Not *another* journey!”

Silence fell while the elders exchanged thoughtful glances. Cherrytail was the first to speak. “What do you think it all means, Tawnypelt?”

“I think the ‘eldest trees’ must be the Clan elders,” Tawnypelt replied. “That’s why I’m trying to speak to the elders in all the Clans, to find out if you’ve had any dreams or seen any signs.”

All three elders shared the same confused expression. “We’re not medicine cats,” Sparrowpelt muttered.

“Then Bluestar talked about the ‘moonless dark,’” Tawnypelt continued. “I believe that means we won’t have the Moonpool anymore. We won’t be able to make contact with StarClan that way.”

“No Moonpool?” Cherrytail sounded shocked.

“The Twolegs have already built barriers around it,” Tawnypelt pointed out. “What if we can’t ever get to it again? How would we reach StarClan then?”

Murmurs of agreement came from the elders. “We’re worried about that too,” Fallowfern mewed.

“Is anything being done about it in SkyClan?” Tawnypelt asked.

“If it is,” Fallowfern replied, “no cat has told us.”

“I don’t think any cat is taking the Moonpool problem seriously,” Sparrowpelt added.

“It must be difficult,” Tawnypelt mewed, aware that Leafstar was ruffling her fur, ready to take offense. Glancing at the Clan leader, she added, “With all the upheaval about your leadership.”

Clearly Leafstar had no intention of discussing her leadership with a cat from another Clan. “What’s being done is a question for the medicine cats,” she responded. “But it has been on my mind too. For some reason, I’ve been having vivid dreams about Echosong and the gorge.”

Sparrowpelt pricked up his ears, his eyes gleaming. “I have good memories about the gorge,” he declared with a *mrrow* of laughter. “We got up to some mischief there, didn’t we, Cherrytail?”

The tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat whisked her tail over his ear. “We’re not apprentices anymore, you silly furball.”

Hiding her amusement, Tawnypelt turned to Leafstar. “Why are you bringing up the gorge now?” she asked.

The Clan leader hesitated for a moment. “If the Moonpool is really cut off from the Clans, and we have to seek out a new home,” she replied, “I would be inclined to take SkyClan back to the gorge. At least, if I’m still leader by then.”

Tawnypelt’s ears flicked up in surprise; glancing at the elders, she saw the same surprise reflected in their eyes. “I thought when you came to join us by the lake, you meant to stay for good,” she meowed.

“So did we,” Sparrowpelt muttered.

“We had so much trouble with rats in the gorge,” Fallowfern reminded her leader. “What if they’ve come back?”

Leafstar twitched an ear. “We won’t know until we try,” she pointed out. “And don’t tell me that SkyClan isn’t resourceful enough to outwit a few rats.”

All Tawnypelt’s muscles tensed with dismay at the Clan leader’s words. She had heard the story of what had happened when Firestar had traveled on his quest to restore SkyClan, and she thought that Leafstar was seriously underestimating the risk. The battle against the rats had cost Firestar a life. And with the gorge having been empty for so long since Darktail and his rogues abandoned it, the rats would have had plenty of time to move in and build up their strength.

Besides—and more importantly—though she wanted support to find a new Moonpool, the last thing Tawnypelt wanted was to divide the Clans. It was bad enough that the elders in other Clans had suggested they would stay by the lake instead of following their Clanmates anywhere.

“You really want to leave the rest of the Clans?” she asked Leafstar.

The SkyClan leader shook her head sadly. “I’d never *want* that,” she meowed. “But it has to be an option. And right now I have to consider what’s best for my Clan.”

“But how would a life without StarClan be best for any cat?” Tawnypelt protested.

“Maybe SkyClan’s part of StarClan would split off from the rest,” Fallowfern suggested. “Echosong communicated with our ancestors in the Whispering Cave. I don’t see why that couldn’t happen again.”

Tawnypelt could find no words to reply. She hadn’t even considered that possibility.

Eventually, thanking Leafstar and the elders for their time, she left the den and found a sheltered spot in some long grass at the edge of the camp where she could sit and think.

The sun was setting, staining the camp floor scarlet, when the young warrior Beesting came running over to where Tawnypelt was crouched among the grass. “Leafstar invites you to come and eat with us,” she mewed with a nod of respect.

“Thank you, Beesting,” Tawnypelt responded, unfolding herself and giving her pelt a shake. “I’m coming.”

Most of the Clan had gathered around the fresh-kill pile. Hawkwing beckoned Tawnypelt to a place next to him; Leafstar was crouched a tail-length away, while Macgyver, Needleclaw, and other SkyClan cats settled down nearby.

Tawnypelt’s jaws watered as Hawkwing dropped a juicy vole in front of her. Clearly SkyClan wasn’t having problems with prey any longer, she thought as she thanked him.

“How did your talk with the elders go?” Hawkwing asked.

Tawnypelt hastily swallowed her bite of vole. “Okay, I suppose,” she replied. “Leafstar mentioned that SkyClan might go back to the gorge.”

Hawkwing’s amber eyes widened. *“What?”*

Oops, Tawnypelt thought. She had assumed that Leafstar would have discussed the possibility with her deputy—who was ready to take over as leader as soon as possible—but clearly she had been wrong.

Hawkwing shot a hard look at Leafstar, who was nibbling on a mouse. “I have no interest in returning to the gorge,” he declared.

Leafstar raised her head. “Why not? If the Moonpool is closed to us now, maybe our time by the lake is over.”

“But we don’t know that for sure yet. The Twolegs might take their wall away again. Besides,” Hawkwing added, “have you forgotten the prophecy of the Blazing Star? The cats who quested to save the wildcats reminded us that the Clans are meant to stay together. We can’t keep on splitting up from each other any time things get hard.”

“Things don’t have to be so hard,” Leafstar retorted. “When we lived in the gorge, our lives were easier. There was plenty of prey and water. Our caves in the cliff face protected us from bad weather.”

“If life was so great in the gorge, why did we leave?” Hawkwing asked.

Leafstar's eyes narrowed, giving him a baleful look. "You know as well as I do that Darktail and his rogues drove us out," she snapped.

"That's right," Hawkwing responded with a nod. "Which means it's not as safe there as you claim it is."

"That was seasons ago." Leafstar lashed her tail irritably. "The rogues are long gone, and we should be able to settle in there again without too much fuss."

"That might be so," Hawkwing admitted. "But I haven't forgotten what a tough journey it was from the gorge to the lake. Sure, strong young cats could make the journey back there. But what about the elders? What about the kits and apprentices? What about you, Leafstar? Cats died when we traveled to reach the lake. Going back could be just as dangerous, and that's not a risk I'm willing to subject my Clan to."

Tawnypelt winced, seeing Leafstar tense at her deputy's words, her shoulder fur beginning to bush up.

"*Your* Clan?" The leader's tone was scathing. "Is it your Clan already?"

Hawkwing shook his head. "I'm sorry, Leafstar. But you know what I mean. I'm just thinking about the welfare of every Clan cat."

"He's right," Macgyver meowed; he had been sitting quietly, attentive to the debate. "No cat who is old enough to remember the journey from the gorge is in any hurry to repeat it going back."

"The rogues may have moved on," Needleclaw added, "but who knows what might have moved in since SkyClan left?"

Beesting stared at her, wide-eyed. "Like what?"

"Could be anything," Needleclaw replied, tilting her head in thought. "Foxes, badgers, dogs . . . even Twolegs."

A shudder passed through Beesting. "Then we might be better off just staying by the lake," she declared. "Better to be without StarClan and safe than with StarClan but have to fight off swarms of badgers all the time."

"That's enough of that," Rabbitleap meowed, with a stern look at the young warrior. "It's bad luck even to suggest such a thing."

"More than bad luck." Macgyver gave Beesting a sharp glance. "Having StarClan watch over us is what makes us a Clan, not just a bunch of rogues."

But it was too late to take back the young warrior's words. They hung in the air; Tawnypelt could see that all the gathered cats were thinking about

what might happen. It was clear in the way they were shifting their paws and leaving their prey half eaten. They were uncomfortable with the idea of a gorge overrun by enemies or of living their lives without the guidance of StarClan.

“This whole discussion is pointless,” Hawkwing snapped, rising to his paws. “There’s no question of returning to the gorge—not on my watch. All we can do is wait for StarClan’s guidance.”

Tawnypelt exchanged an anxious look with Leafstar. She had come to SkyClan in search of answers, but she felt no closer to understanding than she had when Bluestar first gave her the prophecy.

She let out a long sigh. *What does the future hold?*

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Chapter Nine

"And that's all I can tell you." Moonpaw's legs felt shaky after speaking so long in front of the scrutiny of her Clanmates. She let herself slip down into a crouch and waited apprehensively for the questions she knew were coming.

Squirrelstar had led Moonpaw and the other cats into the forest, to a sunny spot at the foot of a gnarled oak tree, so that they could talk without being stared at by the rest of the Clan. Her Clanmates were sitting around Moonpaw in a ragged circle; she let her gaze travel around, trying to judge how they would react to her story.

Her mother, Thriftear, was the first to speak. "For StarClan's sake, Moonpaw, why did you never tell me or your father what you were going through?"

"Yes, why didn't you come to us?" Her father, Bayshine, sounded hurt. "You should have known you could trust us."

"Well, for a long time, I thought she wasn't real. That she was an imaginary friend, like Thriftear told me when I was a kit," Moonpaw responded. "But when I realized she was real, I did try. That's why I was asking so many questions about my sister. It wasn't just curiosity, or because I was missing her. It was because Morningkit was haunting me—harassing me. She's always in my head, wanting me to focus on her. And just recently, when I tried to ask her to leave me alone, again, she was able to hurt me. She scratched her claws down my back."

As if Moonpaw's words had provoked her, Morningkit let out a snort. *Come on, you had that coming. And I'm* harassing *you? I'm the only cat*

who's been on your side from the beginning.

Morningkit, this isn't the time— Moonpaw protested.

Morningkit ignored the interruption. *If you had just listened to me, you would be happy right now, instead of facing this group of cats who all think you're weird or dangerous. You should realize that we're stronger together, but no—you're just ruining everything! Do you want your Clanmates to separate us?*

That was exactly what Moonpaw wanted. But she shook her head, wishing she could shake Morningkit out of it.

"I think Moonpaw is trying really hard." That was Shinepaw, speaking forcefully in Moonpaw's defense. "I've seen it for myself. She wants to be a good apprentice."

Moonpaw flashed her friend a grateful look, and felt even more grateful when Sunbeam spoke up.

"It's true," her mentor declared. "Moonpaw does work hard. I used to think she was easily distracted, but now that I know what she has to put up with, I'm surprised she can concentrate at all."

"She learned a lot when she was with us," Jayfeather pointed out, and Alderheart gave a nod of agreement. "And I learned what a strong cat she is," Jayfeather continued. "She can overcome this."

Truly thankful for her Clanmates' support, Moonpaw began to hope that this conference would be much gentler than she had feared.

But then Myrtlebloom sprang to her paws and took a pace forward, confronting Moonpaw with her eyes narrowed in rage. "Sunkit said that Moonpaw lured him out of the nursery and out of camp. She abandoned him in a hollow tree, and he was terrified. At first I thought—"

"But I didn't!" Moonpaw interrupted.

"At first I thought Sunkit was confused, and that Moonpaw had actually rescued him," Myrtlebloom continued as if Moonpaw hadn't spoken. "But now that I've had time to think about it, and I've learned more, I think it probably was Moonpaw and Morningkit who led Sunkit away."

"It certainly wasn't Moonpaw," Jayfeather put in with an exasperated roll of his blind blue eyes. "She was asleep in my den all night. How many more times do I have to say this?"

"But that's not all," Daisy put in, padding forward to stand at Myrtlebloom's side. "There was another night when Moonpaw turned up at the nursery, and she was acting very strangely."

“That’s true,” Moonpaw admitted, trying to keep her voice steady. “I think those were times when Morningkit had taken over. Please, Myrtlebloom,” she added, her heart throbbing with guilt, “I would never hurt a kit. You have to believe me!”

“Oh, I believe you,” Myrtlebloom responded. She was calmer, though there was no friendliness in her tone. “But I don’t forgive you. Moonpaw, you knew all along that you might be a danger to the Clan because of your sister, but you still said nothing.”

Moonpaw drooped her head, unable to argue with Myrtlebloom’s accusation. Her sense of guilt swelled within her until she could hardly breathe. By keeping her troubles to herself, she had put every other cat in danger.

“So what do you think we should do about Moonpaw?” Squirrelstar asked, glancing around the circle of cats. “Until we figure out how to drive her sister away, is it safe to let her roam around freely?”

“I think it depends on what Morningkit is like,” Alderheart responded thoughtfully. “Is she just mischievous and distracting, or is she malicious?” He turned to Moonpaw; she was a little encouraged by the warmth in his eyes, and his voice when he spoke to her was gentle. “Moonpaw, what kind of things has Morningkit been saying to you?”

I have to be completely honest, Moonpaw thought desperately. *It’s my only hope.*

“Sometimes she just wants to play or make jokes,” she replied. “I don’t mind her when she’s like that. But sometimes she says terrible things about the Clan, and she doesn’t want me to be a responsible apprentice. She distracts me when I’m trying to listen to Sunbeam,” she added with a nod to her mentor. “And any time I want to rededicate myself to serving my Clan, she seems to take offense and wants me to do the opposite. It’s like she doesn’t want me to do anything that isn’t with her.

“Then sometimes she threatens me: She wants me to go to be with her in her world. That means I would have to die and never go to StarClan.” Moonpaw couldn’t help her voice quivering on the last few words.

“Oh, Moonpaw!” Thriftear cried out in pain, and Bayshine curled his tail comfortingly around her shoulders.

Moonpaw wanted to go to her mother, but she knew that the interrogation wasn’t over; besides, Morningkit’s indignant voice was ringing in her mind. *You’re only telling them about the bad things I do! It’s not fair!*

“I hadn’t realized Morningkit was threatening you,” Goldenpaw meowed, his eyes wide with surprise as he gazed at Moonpaw.

“It does sound serious,” Sunbeam agreed. “It’s no wonder Moonpaw was distracted during our training sessions.”

Moonpaw felt that the cats who surrounded her were beginning to look at her more sympathetically. Telling the truth had been the right decision, she realized with relief.

But Myrtlebloom was shaking her head, clearly unconvinced. “What if this voice isn’t really Morningkit?” she asked. “No other dead kit has ever haunted their littermate like this before.”

“Are you calling my daughter a liar?” Bayshine demanded, his shoulder fur bristling.

“No, Bayshine, I’m not. Keep your fur on,” Myrtlebloom retorted. “I believe that *Moonpaw* believes what she’s saying. But what if all this stuff she’s been telling us about Morningkit is all in her head? We have to accept that Moonpaw might just be a very troubled cat.” She cast an apologetic look at Moonpaw as she finished speaking.

“You may be right, Myrtlebloom,” Jayfeather meowed, with a dismissive whisk of his tail that suggested just the opposite. “But I’ve seen all kinds of things in my time as a medicine cat. After all, it’s not all that long ago that Ashfur returned from StarClan to take over Bramblestar’s body. I can believe that Morningkit is real. Don’t forget that I’ve spent a lot of time with Moonpaw. She may be having a tough time right now, but I believe she’s a good cat at heart and a loyal ThunderClan apprentice. Does any cat think I’m not a good judge of character?”

Jayfeather swept his blind gaze over all the group; when no cat responded, he gave a satisfied nod. “I believe that Moonpaw is telling the truth. When she slept in the medicine-cat den, I had a feeling that some other cat was there, although I couldn’t scent or hear an intruder. I think Moonpaw’s only problem is having a littermate who doesn’t know where she belongs. And there’s something else, something no cat here knows, except perhaps Alderheart.” His voice grew low and intense. “Brambleclaw has also seen Morningkit and spoken to her himself.” Turning to Myrtlebloom, he added, “Would you say Brambleclaw is a troubled cat?”

Looking thoroughly disconcerted, Myrtlebloom shook her head and took a step back.

“You’re telling us that Brambleclaw is involved in this?” Squirrelstar spoke sharply as she turned to Jayfeather. “I’m not happy about that. He’s been through a lot, he’s ill, and he’s been hurt by destructive spirits before. The Clans may have put Ashfur behind them, but Brambleclaw never will. I won’t allow him to be victimized again, and that’s why I don’t want Moonpaw visiting Brambleclaw.”

“Aren’t we forgetting something?” Alderheart asked, gazing around at his Clanmates. “Moonpaw isn’t the first Clan cat to see spirits. Tree and Rootspring can both do that. I know it’s not quite the same for them, but maybe Tree could come to speak to Moonpaw and give her some advice.”

“That’s a good idea.” At last, Myrtlebloom’s hostility had faded and she sounded hopeful. “If Tree can’t fix Moonpaw’s problem, he could at least confirm that the spirit she claims to be hearing is real.”

A murmur of agreement came from the other cats, though Daisy was still looking doubtful. “That’s fine for when Tree can get here,” she meowed, “but what should we do with Moonpaw in the meantime? She needs some cat to watch over her.”

Moonpaw burned with shame to realize that Daisy, who was usually so kind, mistrusted her so deeply. She was sure that no cat would want to watch her when they could be hunting or training or just spending time with their Clanmates.

“We can watch over Moonpaw,” Shinepaw responded to Daisy. “Me and Goldenpaw. We’re her friends and we share the apprentices’ den with her. We can take that responsibility. We can take turns lying across the entrance so that no cat can get in or out without our knowing.”

Gazing at her two fellow apprentices, Moonpaw felt grateful, remembering how comforted she had felt by their friendship. But in a flash, she remembered that it hadn’t been enough. Her heart hardened. *Too bad! They shouldn’t have betrayed me.*

“Thank you, Shinepaw and Goldenpaw. That should work. But do let us know if it becomes too difficult,” Squirrelstar mewed approvingly. Turning to Moonpaw, she added, “Remember, this is all meant to help you. You’re not in trouble, but we’re making changes for your own good and for the good of the Clan. Go back to camp and take something to eat from the fresh-kill pile. Sunbeam will take it from there.”

Moonpaw dipped her head. “Yes, Squirrelstar.”

The Clan leader led the way back to the stone hollow, and Moonpaw padded along after her, aware of every cat's gaze on her. She felt as if several enemies were attacking her all at once, her emotions were so conflicted. She was relieved that she wasn't to be kicked out of the Clan, but every hair on her pelt was hot with humiliation. It made her miserable to think that all her Clanmates had been sitting around talking about her when she had believed she was hiding her problems so well.

And I could have gone on hiding them, Moonpaw thought resentfully, *if Goldenpaw hadn't broken his promise and told them my secret.* Even if it was for the best that her Clanmates knew the truth, she couldn't help feeling betrayed by Goldenpaw and Shinepaw, just as she was beginning to trust them.

Back in the stone hollow, Moonpaw didn't bother going to the fresh-kill pile. Even though sunhigh had passed while she was in the forest, she wasn't hungry; she felt as though dark water were churning around in her belly.

Instead, she headed back to the apprentices' den, seeing that Sunbeam was sitting outside, waiting for her.

Another cat who has to watch over me as if I'm a kit.

"I think you need to rest after that," Sunbeam mewed sympathetically. "Go in and sleep now, and I'll watch the entrance. If you feel better later, we'll do some battle training, and get back to our routine tomorrow."

"Yes, Sunbeam." Moonpaw dipped her head. "Thank you."

As Moonpaw curled up in her nest, aware of Sunbeam crouched at the den entrance, she felt as exhausted as if she had run all the way around the lake. But as she slipped into the welcome darkness of sleep, a voice whispered in her mind.

If I had lived, I would never have betrayed you like Goldenpaw did. The only cat you can trust is me. When are you going to accept that?

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Chapter Ten

At dawn Ivypool had led out a hunting party, and now every cat was eating their piece of fresh-kill in rapid bites, eager to start the journey back to Clan territory. While he ate, Starlingpaw watched Crowfeather gulping down a thrush. He still wondered at the rapid recovery the WindClan tom had made since he'd woken from unconsciousness a few days before.

Crowfeather was weaker than usual, and when he spoke, his thoughts seemed scattered and confused. But he could walk with a little help, and had made several forays along the ravine, with one or the other of the medicine cats by his side.

And that means we can all go home, Starlingpaw thought thankfully.

But Starlingpaw wasn't sure what their return would mean, because he couldn't tell what Crowfeather remembered. Did he know that Starlingpaw had seen him in spirit form and overheard everything he had said?

Sometimes Starlingpaw thought he did. Every once in a while, Crowfeather would give him a knowing look that suggested he did remember. But at other times his eyes would glaze over as if he didn't even remember his own name.

In some of Crowfeather's lucid moments, Starlingpaw wondered if he wanted to discuss what had happened between them. But the WindClan deputy said nothing, and Starlingpaw certainly didn't want to reveal to the other cats what had happened. Since Crowfeather had finally opened his eyes, they hadn't been alone for a moment.

Nectarsong swallowed her last bite of mouse and swiped her tongue around her jaws. "How do you feel, Crowfeather?" she asked. "Are you

ready to go, or do you need more time to rest?”

“I’m ready,” Crowfeather replied. “I don’t want to delay any longer. I want to go home. I feel well rested now, so we should head off while the weather is good.”

“Then it’s time to go,” Nectarsong announced. She glanced around at the other questing cats. “Is that okay with you?”

Duskfur sprang to her paws. “I can’t wait!”

Ivypool took the lead while the cats climbed out of the ravine. Starlingpaw showed Crowfeather the easier path he had found on the way down, and the WindClan tom struggled painfully upward, led by Starlingpaw and with Fidgetflake right behind him.

Once they reached the top of the cliff, Crowfeather was able to move more freely; as he walked, he was flanked by the medicine cats on either side, so that he could lean on their shoulders if he grew tired. The rest of the group followed, with Nectarsong and Starlingpaw bringing up the rear.

The grass on the hilltop was rimmed with frost, and there was a chilly tang in the air. A brisk wind was driving clouds across the sky, but here and there were ragged patches of blue, and the sun, newly risen, broke through from time to time. Starlingpaw took a deep breath of the cold air. It was good to be on the move again.

When he was sure that he and Nectarsong were out of earshot of the other cats, Starlingpaw drew closer to her side. “May I ask you something?” he mewed timidly.

His mentor turned her head to look at him, blinking. “Of course.”

Starlingpaw chose his words carefully. “I want to know what a cat should do if he finds out that a Clan cat is keeping a secret the rest of the Clan should know,” he explained. “Should he tell the secret?”

Nectarsong twitched her whiskers thoughtfully. “That depends. How did this hypothetical cat learn the secret in the first place?”

“It was an accident,” Starlingpaw declared. “The cat was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. He wasn’t spying or anything.”

“Okay,” Nectarsong continued as the two cats padded along side by side. “Does the cat think the Clan really needs to know the secret, or is he just eager to spread gossip?”

“Oh, the Clan needs to know,” Starlingpaw assured her fervently.

“If that’s so, then he should tell,” Nectarsong responded. “A warrior’s duty is to protect the Clan.” She gave Starlingpaw a swift glance, a mixture

of curiosity and amusement in her eyes. “You might as well learn that lesson now.”

Mouse dung! She knows I’m talking about myself.

But after a moment’s thought, Starlingpaw realized it didn’t matter that he had given himself away. Nectarsong wasn’t putting any pressure on him.

“Thank you,” he meowed, but he didn’t say anything about Crowfeather yet. He felt better about his decision, but he needed to find the right time to speak.

Crowfeather’s paws were dragging as the sun climbed toward sunhigh, and his head was lowered as if he was almost too exhausted to keep going. Starlingpaw admired him for getting this far after he had been injured so badly.

“It’s time we stopped,” Fidgetflake announced. “We could all do with a rest, and, Crowfeather, I want to check you over.”

“I’m fine,” Crowfeather insisted.

“You’re fine when I say you are,” Fidgetflake retorted. “And you’ll rest when I tell you to.”

“You sound just like Jayfeather,” Ivypool commented with a *mrrow* of amusement. “It must be a medicine-cat thing.”

Crowfeather let out a grunt and sank to the ground so that Fidgetflake could examine him. Shadowsight headed off to look for useful herbs, while Starlingpaw and the rest of the group scattered to hunt.

They had left the bleak terrain of the ravine behind; here the grass grew lush, with stretches of fern and clumps of bushes that still kept some of their leaves. Starlingpaw hunted with Nectarsong. Soon they spotted a rabbit that popped out of a hole in a mossy bank and sat nibbling the grass as if it hadn’t a care in the world.

“I’m guessing there aren’t many predators around,” Nectarsong murmured in Starlingpaw’s ear.

She worked her way around to position herself between the rabbit and its hole, while Starlingpaw flattened himself in the long grass. As soon as she was ready, Nectarsong signaled with her tail, and Starlingpaw leaped up, hurling himself at the rabbit with a ferocious growl. The rabbit let out a terrified squeal and bolted for its burrow, fleeing right into Nectarsong’s paws. The squeal was cut off abruptly as Nectarsong bit down on its neck.

“Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” she meowed, picking up the limp body of the rabbit and heading toward Starlingpaw. “Well done,” she mumbled around her mouthful, giving her apprentice a nod of approval. “You got that just right.”

Heading back to join the other cats, Starlingpaw saw that they had also made their kills. They were going to eat better than they had for many days, since Crowfeather fell into the ravine.

When they arrived back to where Crowfeather was resting, they found Shadowsight setting down a bunch of leaves in front of him. “These are daisy,” the medicine cat told him. “They’re part of the traveling herbs mixture. I couldn’t find sorrel, chamomile, or burnet, but these should help at least.”

“They taste vile,” Crowfeather grumbled. “I’m not a miserable rabbit.” But he ate the leaves all the same.

“Okay,” Ivypool began when every cat had settled down to eat. “Let’s just take stock and discuss what we’ve achieved on this quest. What are we going to report to our Clans?”

“Precious little, I’m afraid,” Shadowsight sighed.

“Oh, I don’t agree.” Crowfeather sounded as if he was perking up, either because of the daisy leaves or because of his share of the rabbit that he was eating. “We’ve learned one very important thing: StarClan is still watching over us. We just have to find a way to make contact with them again.”

Starlingpaw took a deep breath. His belly felt tight with anxiety, but he knew this was the time. “That’s not all!” he blurted out.

Every cat’s gaze turned toward him. For a moment his throat dried up, but he knew there was no stopping now.

“Stoneteller also said that there’s a dangerous cat among us,” he announced. “A cat who will cause great destruction to the Clans.”

Crowfeather let out a hiss of fury. “How would you know what Stoneteller told me?” he demanded. “I told no cat.”

“You told *me*,” Starlingpaw retorted. “Just not while you were awake. You talk in your sleep,” he added, not wanting to reveal that he had seen Crowfeather in spirit form. “And since I was on guard, I heard it all.”

“Did you indeed?” Crowfeather looked startled, and his eyes narrowed as he regarded the young apprentice. “I’ve never been told that I talk in my sleep before.”

Starlingpaw felt a jolt in his chest, as if Crowfeather's gaze were as hard as a rock. In that instant he knew that the WindClan tom *did* remember him watching his spirit form, and he knew Starlingpaw was lying about hearing him talk in his sleep.

He knows that I was overhearing his spirit.

"Is Starlingpaw telling the truth about what Stoneteller said?" Fidgetflake demanded, his voice brusque. "It doesn't matter how he found out. It only matters if it's true."

Crowfeather hesitated, as if he was reluctant to reply. "Yes," he admitted at last. "But he doesn't have it completely right. Stoneteller warned me about a cat who *might* go bad but could still be helped, not one who is bad already."

The gathered cats exchanged wary glances; Starlingpaw could tell that they didn't know how to react.

"Then why didn't you tell us?" Nectarsong asked. "Why did you choose to hide it?"

"I wasn't hiding it—not exactly," Crowfeather replied. "I just wanted to keep it to myself until I'd had more time to think about Stoneteller's words and what they meant. I didn't see any point in alarming the rest of you—or, worse still, starting a discussion about who this deceiver might be. Not until I got the whole thing clearer in my own mind first."

"Fair enough," Ivypool commented. "But it's still very concerning."

"I agree," Shadowsight meowed with a vehement nod. "What if this supposed bad cat, or bad-cat-in-the-making, is behind the Moonpool being closed off in the first place?"

"I don't see how that's possible," Crowfeather responded. "No cat can be blamed for what the Twolegs get up to."

"Maybe not." Starlingpaw felt emboldened by the support of the other cats; they weren't happy that Crowfeather had kept this news to himself. "But could this maybe-bad cat Stoneteller told you about be the same two-faced cat that Tawnypelt warned us of? If so, that's important information that you chose not to share, Crowfeather!"

Crowfeather rose to his paws, his dark gray fur bristling. "You've got nerve!" he snarled, glaring at Starlingpaw. "How dare you question a seasoned warrior and a Clan deputy about what he should or should not tell?"

Starlingpaw hadn’t realized just how intimidating the WindClan deputy could be. His first reaction was to stammer out an apology, but instead he kept his jaws clamped shut, returning glare for glare.

I’m in the right! Crowfeather should have been open from the beginning.

Ivypool also rose to her paws. “Let’s all keep our fur on,” she mewed calmly. “Starlingpaw’s behavior is a matter for his mentor, and I’m sure Nectarsong will deal with him as she sees fit.”

Nectarsong nodded. “Of course, Ivypool.”

Starlingpaw wasn’t too bothered to hear that. *It was Nectarsong who told me to speak out in the first place.*

“I suggest we end this discussion for now,” Ivypool continued. “We all have a lot to think over, but sunhigh is long gone, and we should get closer to home before we make camp for the night.”

“Quite right,” Duskfur mewed, and the two medicine cats also murmured agreement.

The questing cats set off once more. Starlingpaw was aware of tension vibrating among them, like the air before a storm, and guessed that every cat was thinking over what Stoneteller’s words might mean.

He noticed too that Crowfeather kept shooting filthy looks at him as they headed onward, but he did his best to hold his head high. Thinking of the advice Nectarsong had given him, he silently promised himself that he wouldn’t let a warrior intimidate him or make him feel guilty for telling the truth. That was the way to make his father proud!

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Chapter Eleven

“It was so good to see Birchfeather again,” Tawnypelt mewed. “I watched his third trial and he did really well. He’s a true SkyClan cat now.”

The tortoiseshell she-cat was sitting beside the fresh-kill pile in the ThunderClan camp, sharing a vole with Squirrelstar. The Clan leader had welcomed her back warmly, eager to hear her news since they had last met.

“I’m glad to hear he succeeded,” Squirrelstar responded. “But aren’t you sorry that he won’t be going back to ShadowClan?”

“A bit,” Tawnypelt admitted. “But I’m so proud of him, and he’s happy; that’s what matters. He and Ridgeglow are so much in love.”

Squirrelstar let out a *mrrow* of amusement. “Well, you can’t stand in the way of young love. So,” she continued, her amusement fading, “I assume things didn’t go well with Tigerstar when you went home to speak to him?”

“No. Not at all.”

“You can always stay here, you know,” Squirrelstar meowed. “At least until Brambleclaw gets better.”

Until he gets better . . . A weight of grief settled on Tawnypelt’s heart. She was afraid that Squirrelstar was deceiving herself, unable to accept that soon her mate would be hunting with StarClan. *If only she were right* . . .

“Thank you.” Tawnypelt made herself speak briskly. “I don’t know what to do about Tigerstar. I’m not ready to give up my quest to speak to the elders in all the Clans about what is happening at the Moonpool. But if I go home to ShadowClan now, Tigerstar will make me stop. He doesn’t realize how precarious things are, how close we might be to disaster.”

Squirrelstar nodded understandingly. “So tell me what the SkyClan elders had to say.”

“They’re concerned that no cat is doing enough to make plans about what to do if the Moonpool is closed to us for good. The one plan that any SkyClan cats are discussing is the possibility of going back to the gorge, separating from the rest of us again.”

Squirrelstar froze in the middle of taking another bite of vole, staring at Tawnypelt with shocked green eyes. “In StarClan’s name, *why*? They wouldn’t really go, would they?”

“I think they might,” Tawnypelt sighed. “Leafstar has been dreaming about the gorge, and many of the older SkyClan cats have good memories of living there.”

“But they can’t do that!” Squirrelstar objected. “If SkyClan leaves, the other Clans might head off to find new homes too. The Clans could break up!”

“At last a leader is listening to me!” Tawnypelt breathed out the words in a huge gust of relief. *Finally some cat can see why I’m so anxious about this.* “I think if I can get all the elders to agree,” she continued, “then maybe I can get the Clans to cooperate on the problem instead of all going their separate ways.”

Squirrelstar let out a derisive huff. “Good luck getting all the Clans to agree on anything. But if you can pull it off, Tawnypelt, then I’ll back you all the way. In the meantime, you’re welcome to stay in ThunderClan as long as you want. I do think that you being here does Brambleclaw some good.”

“Really?” Tawnypelt couldn’t help feeling a tiny quiver of hope. *Maybe Squirrelstar is seeing something I’m not.*

Squirrelstar sighed. “I’d be lying if I said that he’s doing well.”

Tawnypelt’s hope died. “Thank you for listening to me, Squirrelstar.” It took a massive effort to force the words out. “It’s good to have a friend on my side. Now may I go and see Brambleclaw?”

“Of course,” Squirrelstar replied. “I’ll come with you.”

The two she-cats padded across the camp to the medicine cats’ den. As they approached, they heard a voice coming from behind the bramble screen. Squirrelstar raised her tail for Tawnypelt to halt.

The voice was Jayfeather’s, though it sounded so soft and gentle that for a moment Tawnypelt had mistaken it for some other cat’s. Peering through

the brambles, she could just make out the medicine cat crouched beside Brambleclaw's nest. Brambleclaw was sunk deep into the moss and fern, looking as diminished and weak as if he were an elder of many, many seasons.

"I want to thank you, Brambleclaw, for being the only father I have ever known," Jayfeather murmured. "I know I haven't always shown you how much I appreciate you, but I hope you know that I am the cat I am today because of you. Every cat I heal from now on, I'll do it in your name."

Squirrelstar backed away from the den, shaking her head helplessly. "I'm sorry, I can't do this right now," she choked out. "It's too much for me."

"I understand," Tawnypelt responded, touching the Clan leader comfortingly on her shoulder with the tip of her tail.

Brambleclaw was getting worse, she could see, and his Clanmates were taking their chance to say their last goodbyes. Even gruff Jayfeather, who had seen so many cats come and go, was finding it hard to cope with seeing the cat who had raised him being so close to death.

Tawnypelt gave Jayfeather a few moments to finish his farewell, then brushed through the bramble screen, clearing her throat to announce her presence.

"**G**reetings, Tawnypelt," Jayfeather mewed, jumping to his paws and giving his pelt a shake, as if he didn't want any cat to detect his moment of emotion. "I'm glad to see you. I want to find some strengthening herbs for Brambleclaw, but I didn't want to leave him alone. Alderheart is in the nursery right now."

"That's fine," Tawnypelt responded. "I'll stay until you get back."

Jayfeather hurried out and Tawnypelt took his place by her brother's side. She could smell the sickness on him and hear his difficult, shallow breaths. She felt as though sadness were enfolding her like a smothering black cloud.

Several moments passed before Brambleclaw realized that she was there. His eyes grew brighter, and he reached out a paw toward her. "Greetings, Tawnypelt." The words were sighed out. "It's so good to see you."

"I promised I would come back," Tawnypelt whispered.

Brambleclaw let out a purr. "I wanted to make sure I told you how much you mean to me. You've been a good sister."

“Oh, no, I haven’t!” Grief and regret quivered in Tawnypelt’s words. “I’ve made so many mistakes over the years.”

Brambleclaw’s purr deepened. “Haven’t we all? But in any case, it’s all forgiven now.”

The tumult inside Tawnypelt subsided a little at her brother’s words. She let out a long sigh and let her head rest for a moment against Brambleclaw’s shoulder.

When she looked up again, it was to see her brother looking around the den, confusion blurring his amber eyes. “I forgive the orange cat, too,” he murmured. “Where has she gone?”

Tawnypelt was jolted out of the fog of her grief. She wasn’t sure who her brother was talking about, and guessed he must be delirious.

“I don’t know of any orange cat,” she told him.

“Maybe you don’t,” Brambleclaw mewed. “She hasn’t been around for a while. Maybe I scared her off.” He looked around again, his eyes vaguely troubled. “There are things I need to do for Moonpaw and the orange cat before I go.”

Moonpaw? Tawnypelt was startled to hear the odd little apprentice’s name on her brother’s lips. Was she somehow connected with Brambleclaw?

Then Tawnypelt pushed the thought aside. The orange cat was probably some cat from Brambleclaw’s past, or maybe a warrior of StarClan who had come to guide his paws on the path to their hunting grounds. Whoever the cat was, Brambleclaw wasn’t making any sense; it hurt Tawnypelt to see his mind begin to wither like a dead leaf.

Brambleclaw seemed to slip into a doze, and Tawnypelt sat by his side until Jayfeather reappeared, a bunch of leaves in his mouth.

“He’s sleeping. Good.” Jayfeather dropped the leaves by the side of Brambleclaw’s nest. “Thank you for staying with him, Tawnypelt.”

Tawnypelt looked up at him. “Every moment is precious now.”

Jayfeather nodded understandingly, sitting by Tawnypelt’s side. “How was he while I was away?” he asked.

“He seems so weak . . . ,” Tawnypelt murmured. “And he was talking about an orange cat. Do you know anything about that?”

“Oh, yes.” Jayfeather replied readily, surprising Tawnypelt. “He’s talking about Moonpaw’s sister, Morningkit.”

“Moonpaw’s sister?” Tawnypelt was even more surprised. “I didn’t know she had a sister. I don’t remember meeting her.”

“That’s because Morningkit died moons ago,” Jayfeather told her. “Sadly, she didn’t live very long after she was born. But it seems that her spirit is making itself known. It’s a long story.”

“But what does that have to do with Brambleclaw?” Tawnypelt asked, curious and a little disturbed.

“Brambleclaw is near his end,” Jayfeather explained. “That seems to have made him more attuned with the afterlife and glimpses of things to come. He sees what other cats do not.”

Maybe Brambleclaw would have some of the answers I’ve been seeking, Tawnypelt thought hopefully. If he was so close to StarClan, he might already be sharing some of their knowledge and wisdom.

“Brambleclaw,” she began when he roused again from his doze, “I’m worried that we can’t get in touch with StarClan anymore, now that the Twolegs have closed off the Moonpool. It’s making me wonder whether we’ll have to leave the lake territories. Could you ever imagine the Clans living somewhere else?”

Brambleclaw’s eyes brightened, as if his sister’s questions had called back a glimpse of the strong leader he used to be. His voice was clearer, too. “The Clans have lived in other places before the lake, and maybe in the future they’ll live somewhere else. They will survive if they trust in StarClan and the warrior code.”

“But will the Clans still be together?” Tawnypelt persisted.

Her brother’s gaze grew distant, as if he was staring at something that was hidden from Tawnypelt. “I see them all living in peace and happiness,” he purred. “And their dens will glisten and shine.”

Tawnypelt couldn’t make anything of the last few words. “Do you know where our new Moonpool will be?” she asked him. “If we need a Moonpool, that is.”

But Brambleclaw’s brief animation was dying away, and his voice was blurred as he answered. “Cats are walking by water, in a place they know so well, and the sky overhead is blue and clear.”

That doesn’t help at all, Tawnypelt thought. The place her brother spoke of might be anywhere. He could be talking about the lake territories, or

even the old forest and the Moonstone, which was destroyed seasons ago.

She wanted to go on pressing Brambleclaw for answers, but even while he struggled to stay awake for her sake, his eyes were drifting closed. He needed rest.

Instead of asking any more questions, Tawnypelt drew closer to him. “I love you very much,” she murmured into his ear. “I can’t imagine what my life would have been like without my littermate.” She wanted to say that she couldn’t imagine what she would do when he was gone, but stopped herself in time. That was her burden to bear, not Brambleclaw’s.

Tawnypelt waited until her brother was deeply asleep, then stumbled out of the medicine cats’ den into the open air. She was shaking all over, taking in huge gulps of air.

Jayfeather followed her out. “I know it’s hard to see him like this,” he meowed, briefly touching her shoulder with his tail.

Thankful for Jayfeather’s unexpectedly comforting tone, Tawnypelt did her best to calm herself, steadying her breathing and driving her claws into the ground to quell her shivering. “I just wish the things he was saying made sense to me,” she declared. “I want to understand him.”

“Brambleclaw is very slowly letting go of life,” Jayfeather explained. “He stands on the border of StarClan territory. Cats say all kinds of strange things when they’re dying. You shouldn’t worry about what he says, Tawnypelt. Just concentrate on being with him as he sets his paws on this final path.”

“Those are wise words, Jayfeather,” Tawnypelt murmured. “Thank you. I __”

She broke off at the sound of caterwauling from across the camp, near the entrance to the thorn tunnel. Cats were gathering around, jostling for position, so at first Tawnypelt couldn’t see what the fuss was about. Then she caught a glimpse of a silver-and-white she-cat struggling to make her way through the crowd.

“It’s Ivypool!” she exclaimed. “She’s back from the quest.”

“Good,” Jayfeather grunted. “Then maybe we’re getting somewhere at last.” He headed back into his den, content to wait for news while he cared for Brambleclaw.

At the same moment Squirrelstar emerged from her den on the Highledge, hurled herself down the tumbled rocks, and bounded across the camp. Tawnypelt hesitated for a moment; then, thankful for the distraction from fearing the loss of her brother, she hurried over to join the excited ThunderClan cats.

"Stoneteller told Crowfeather that StarClan is still watching over us," Ivypool was meowing as Tawnypelt approached. "And there's more, but I think I should discuss it with you first, Squirrelstar."

Squirrelstar's response was lost in the yowls of relief that rose from every cat at the news that they were not completely cut off from StarClan.

". . . good to see you safely back," were the next words Tawnypelt heard from the Clan leader. "Is every cat okay?"

"Yes, more or less," Ivypool responded. "Crowfeather was injured, but he's recovering. He'll be fine now that he's back home in WindClan with the medicine cats to take care of him."

Tawnypelt felt her belly lurch. *Crowfeather, hurt?*

She was comforted by the news that StarClan was still watching over the Clans. But was she wrong to feel that Crowfeather's injury was more important, or that her paws were itching to carry her to WindClan?

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Chapter Twelve

Sunbeam was true to her word. Ever since Moonpaw had been forced to tell the truth to Squirrelstar and the other cats a few days before, her mentor had watched over her continually. Every morning she had checked in with Shinepaw and Goldenpaw about how Moonpaw had behaved during the night, and during the day she had kept Moonpaw busy with training.

Moonpaw knew that she should appreciate Sunbeam giving up so much of her time for her, but she couldn't help resentment creeping in, like water rising raindrop by raindrop.

Despite the care they gave her at night, Goldenpaw and Shinepaw had started to distance themselves from her during the day, making sure they didn't work on the same apprentice tasks, and the Clan warriors seemed wary of her.

It's like I have greencough or yellowcough, and they're afraid to catch it.

At least Sunbeam treated her exactly the same when they were training, but it was no fun never getting to work with her fellow apprentices. It just made it all the clearer that there was something wrong with her. Even Morningkit hardly ever spoke to her now, and though Moonpaw welcomed her silence, she couldn't help worrying about what her dead sister was up to.

A keen wind probed Moonpaw's fur as Sunbeam led her down to the lake. The water was gray, ridged with ripples, reflecting the sky above. Moonpaw expected that all the prey would be safely down in their holes.

"I've brought you here to show you how to stalk among pebbles," Sunbeam told her, waving her tail toward the water's edge. "If your prey is

drinking from the lake, then it's busy and isn't likely to spot you, but if you stumble over the stones, then it'll hear you."

Moonpaw nodded. "I see."

"So the trick is to look for nice flat stones, big enough to stand on, and slide forward using just those. Ignore the smaller pebbles. Those are the ones that will give you away. Watch."

Moonpaw kept her gaze fixed on her mentor, admiring how Sunbeam flowed across the ground, her paws seeming to flicker from one flat stone to the next. When she reached the edge of the lake, she stood up and turned to Moonpaw. "Now you try."

Determined to do well, Moonpaw set off, keeping low so that her belly fur brushed against the ground, stretching out to place each paw in turn on a flat stone. But soon she came to a wide stretch of ground covered only with shingle and bits of debris washed up from the lake. She couldn't see any flat stones within reach.

"Mouse dung," she muttered, and added aloud to Sunbeam, "I'm stuck!"

Amusement glimmered in Sunbeam's eyes, but her voice was kind as she mewed, "That's why you need to plot your path before you start. But you were doing very well up to then."

"Thank you, Sunbeam."

"Okay, let's try again," Sunbeam meowed briskly. "This time, I'm going to pretend to be a rabbit coming down to the lake for a nice refreshing drink. I'll look the other way, and I want you to creep up on me. See if you can reach me without alerting me."

Sunbeam turned away, lowering her head to lap, but before Moonpaw could work out a path of flat stones, she spotted another cat walking along the lakeshore from the direction of SkyClan territory. She recognized the tom's sturdy body and yellow pelt.

Oh, Great StarClan, it's Tree! I'd hoped they'd forgotten about him.

Tree halted beside Sunbeam and mewed something, dipping his head in greeting. Sunbeam responded, then waved her tail to beckon Moonpaw. "Over here!" she called. "Tree has come to see you!"

"Hi, Moonpaw," Tree greeted her as she padded alongside the lake to meet him. "Squirrelstar asked me to come and talk to you."

Something about his amiable look, as if he was sure of his welcome, irritated Moonpaw as much as if her pelt were being prickled all over by

holly leaves. It wasn't Tree's fault, she admitted to herself, but every cat in the forest knew how weird he was.

"I'm not done with training yet," she muttered ungraciously. "So you can go right back where you came from."

"Moonpaw!" Sunbeam fixed Moonpaw with a grim, amber-eyed stare. "That disrespect is unacceptable. Apologize to Tree right now!"

Taking a deep breath, Moonpaw lowered her head. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Sunbeam gave her a curt nod, still displeased. "We're done with training for now," she meowed. "Tree, she's all yours."

Moonpaw watched her mentor as she stalked off into the forest, her displeasure vivid in the set of her ears and the angle of her tail.

When she was gone, Tree turned to Moonpaw. He had the same amiable expression, quite unoffended. "Come on," he urged her. "Let's go into the woods and find a nice quiet spot."

Moonpaw padded after him across the stretch of pebbles and up the grassy slope into the shelter of the trees. "I don't know why you're here," she declared defensively. "I know they told you about my dead sister talking to me, but it's fine now. She seems to have moved on all on her own. I don't have a problem anymore."

Tree let out a snort of amusement. "Morningkit probably doesn't like it when you say things like that."

Moonpaw jerked her head to stare at him. "You can see her?"

"No," Tree replied, shaking his head. "But that doesn't mean I don't believe you. Morningkit doesn't seem to be here right now, and I might not be able to see her if she were. But that's okay. I know it isn't all in your mind."

Moonpaw began to soften toward the SkyClan tom. He trusted her without question, when most other cats thought she had bees in her brain.

"Why can't I get rid of Morningkit?" she asked, her words a confession that while her sister had been mostly quiet lately, she was definitely still around.

"There could be all kinds of reasons," Tree replied, heading deeper into the forest. "But the main one is probably the way she resents dying so young. And she must be lonely, with no other spirits like her to make

friends with. That's not your fault, though, Moonpaw," he added. "And it's not your responsibility to fix."

Tree's understanding made Moonpaw feel a little hopeful. "What should I do, then? I feel like I've tried everything."

"Have you tried meditation?" Tree asked.

Moonpaw shook her head. "I'm not even sure what that means."

"That's fine," Tree responded. "I can show you how to calm your mind and feel more at peace."

Moonpaw gave him a doubtful look. "How is that supposed to help me with a rogue spirit?"

"Your problem is that you're afraid of the spirit," Tree told her, halting to face her. "Once you lose the fear, the spirit will lose its hold on you."

Staring at him, dumbfounded, Moonpaw could see nothing but warm understanding in Tree's amber eyes. Maybe he wasn't as weird as every cat seemed to think, or if he was, it was a good weird. "But how can I lose the fear?" she asked. "Ghost cats are scary!"

"They can be," Tree admitted. "But there's really no need to be afraid of them. In general, spirits mean living cats no harm. They're just on a journey to their final destination, and sometimes they get lost."

"Is that what happened to Morningkit?"

"I think so," Tree meowed. "In her case, I think she's having a hard time letting go of the life she could have had."

Moonpaw thought that over. She appreciated everything Tree was saying, and it all sounded sensible and comforting. It also didn't sound like Morningkit. She didn't seem lost. She knew about StarClan, but she refused to go there. Maybe she was lonely, but Moonpaw found it hard to believe Tree when he told her that spirit cats wouldn't harm the living. There had been times when Morningkit had threatened her, wanted her to cross into her world to be with her, and there had been the one time Morningkit had managed to hurt her, leaving a scratch down her back.

If that's not scary, I'm a rabbit!

"Well?" Tree broke into Moonpaw's silent thoughts. "Do you want to give meditation a try?"

Moonpaw didn't want Tree to feel that he was wasting his time, especially when he had come to help her. She nodded. "I'll try anything that might do some good."

“Okay, let’s do it.” Tree’s voice was suddenly full of energy. “Can you take me to a quiet spot in the forest, preferably somewhere we can look through the trees and see the sky?”

Moonpaw knew the exact place: a small clearing surrounded by ferns where water trickled out from among mossy stones, and now, at the beginning of leaf-bare, the bare branches would give a view of the sky.

“Perfect!” Tree meowed as he followed Moonpaw through the barrier of ferns. “To begin with, sit down, get comfortable, and close your eyes.”

Feeling a bit ridiculous, Moonpaw did as she was told. “Now what?” she asked.

“Feel the ground beneath your paws,” Tree instructed her. “Work your claws into the leaf mold. Lovely and squishy, isn’t it? Now, concentrate on how the breeze feels blowing through your fur. Stay very still, take some deep breaths, listen, and imagine the forest stretching out all around you. Be one with it.”

At first Moonpaw felt this was a mouse-brained thing to do, but gradually as she grew still, conscious of each indrawn breath, she began to be aware of the tiny sounds of the forest. The creaking of branches above her head; the gentle gurgling of water; the sudden scurry of some small creature among the dead leaves; in the distance, the thin piping of a bird.

All her tension, all her worry about Morningkit, seemed to drain out of her, through her paws, and into the ground. She felt more peaceful than she could remember.

Moonpaw wasn’t sure how long she’d been sitting there before she heard Tree’s quiet voice. “Now open your eyes and look up.”

Obeying, Moonpaw saw the trees, their tracery of branches outlined delicately against the gray sky. Somehow she felt that she had never really looked at them before, but now she realized how beautiful they were. She let out a long sigh.

“Feeling better?” Tree asked.

“So much better!” Moonpaw exclaimed, turning toward him. “I never imagined that sitting still could feel so good!”

There was a hint of amusement in Tree’s amber eyes. “This is a problem with the life of a warrior,” he began, “and especially with the life of an apprentice. Do this, do that, time for battle practice, time for hunting, and make sure you bring something back for the fresh-kill pile, renew the scent markers, clean out the bedding, fix the elders’ ticks. You never stop!”

Moonpaw let out a snort of laughter. “It’s true,” she agreed. “We never do.” *And I made it worse*, she added silently to herself, *trying to shut Morningkit out by being busy all the time.*

“Well, you need to stop,” Tree told her. “You know what to do now, and if it gets too hard, you can always send for me again. Remember that you’re part of the forest, and you can draw power from that.”

“I understand,” Moonpaw mewed. “Thank you so much, Tree, for meeting with me and not treating me like a freak. You’ve been so nice to me. I’m so sorry for thinking unkind thoughts about you and being rude to you.”

Tree dismissed her words with a wave of his tail. “The reason why I’m one of the happiest cats in any of the Clans is because I learned a long time ago not to concern myself with what other cats think about me.”

I wish I could do that, Moonpaw thought.

“Anyway, I’m really glad you came,” she mewed. “I feel so much better now.”

Tree gave her a nod of approval. “Good. Now let’s go back to your camp. I want a word with your Clan leader.”

As Moonpaw led the way through the trees, she felt a little nervous about what Tree might say to Squirrelstar. Then she realized that it would be okay. She absolutely trusted Tree, and she was full of admiration for him. He hadn’t told her how to clear Morningkit out of her mind, but he had given her a great way to help her cope.

He might be a bit weird, but he’s so, so wise.

When Moonpaw emerged from the thorn tunnel, she saw Squirrelstar and Ivypool, their heads together, deep in conversation near the fresh-kill pile. Tree strode across the camp toward them, then paused briefly.

“Why don’t you get something to eat,” he suggested to Moonpaw. “I’m sure you deserve it.”

To her surprise, Moonpaw felt hungry for the first time in days. Then, as she scurried over to the pile, she realized that Tree had sent her into the exactly right position to overhear what he was about to say to Squirrelstar. She felt a bubble of laughter inside her, but she kept a serious expression and concentrated on the mouse she had chosen.

As Moonpaw was taking the first mouthful, Sunbeam slipped out of the warriors' den and joined her at the fresh-kill pile.

"You're back," she meowed. "Was it okay, with Tree?"

"It was wonderful!" Moonpaw told her.

Sunbeam blinked with surprise at her enthusiastic tone, then nodded toward Tree as he approached the Clan leader. "I'd better hear what he has to say." She bounded off to join the other cats.

"Greetings, Tree," Squirrelstar mewed as Tree halted in front of her and dipped his head. "Did you find out what's the matter with Moonpaw?"

"In a way," Tree replied. "And I have to tell you, Squirrelstar, you've been dealing with this situation all wrong. You shouldn't be treating Moonpaw as if she's a dangerous cat; she isn't. And although I couldn't see the spirit that's haunting her, I sensed something near her."

At Tree's words, Squirrelstar fluffed up her shoulder fur; her green eyes were angry. "Are you telling me how to deal with my Clan?"

Moonpaw felt a spark of anxiety; she wouldn't have wanted to face her Clan leader in a mood like that. Then she saw that Tree wasn't at all intimidated. "If you put it like that, yes," he responded. "You sent for me, Squirrelstar. What did you expect me to do?"

Squirrelstar let out a hiss of annoyance but said no more.

"Morningkit is really there?" Ivypool asked.

Tree gave an exasperated twitch of his whiskers. "Of course she's really there. It's not even that unusual. Cats see spirits all the time."

"Well, you might, but I can assure you that most cats don't." Squirrelstar's voice had an irritated edge. "And even if that were true, what are we supposed to do about Moonpaw's peculiar behavior? Sleepwalking, talking to herself . . . I wouldn't have believed until now that one small apprentice could cause so much disruption in the life of the Clan."

"Sure, the spirit has too much control over Moonpaw," Tree responded. "And that's because Moonpaw doesn't have enough confidence in herself. She doesn't realize yet that she's the one with the real power in this situation."

Sunbeam nodded understandingly. "So what do we do?"

"The best thing the Clan can do for her is to build up her confidence. Help her discover who she really is apart from this intruding spirit. Give her the support she needs to believe in herself, and then let her handle her own affair. She can do it."

Moonpaw was touched that Tree had such belief in her. It was great to hear a cat standing up for her, and in front of Squirrelstar, too. *Maybe something will change.*

However, Squirrelstar didn't seem so convinced. "I'll think over what you said," she told Tree. Turning to Sunbeam, she added, "Give her the rest of the day off from training and let her have some free time."

"Sure, Squirrelstar," Sunbeam responded.

Moonpaw was happy to hear that, but when she had said goodbye to Tree and finished her mouse, she didn't know what to do with herself. It felt weird to be alone after so many days of being watched all the time. And she didn't think she had any reason to go back into the forest to try meditating again.

While she thought, she began giving herself a good grooming. She had twisted her neck to clean the hard-to-reach place on her shoulder when she heard the paw steps of an approaching cat. Turning, she saw Jayfeather.

"Brambleclaw has been asking about you," he murmured, leaning close to her. "He needs to talk to you."

Moonpaw felt a flutter of dismay in her chest, like a trapped bird. This sounded serious. "But Squirrelstar told me not to visit Brambleclaw," she reminded Jayfeather.

"I know, and normally I would respect my Clan leader's wishes," Jayfeather responded. "But this time I'm going to honor the last wishes of my father. Come by just after sunset. Squirrelstar and Tawnypelt are with him now, but I'm going to send them off to eat something and get some rest. I'll make sure that you and Brambleclaw have a moment alone."

Moonpaw finished her grooming, wondering what Brambleclaw would have to say to her. Her belly began to churn with nervousness; she wanted to get up and start pacing the camp, then reflected that every cat would think she was acting weird again.

Instead, she padded out into the forest, found a quiet spot, and sat down with her tail wrapped around her paws. Closing her eyes, she began breathing deeply as Tree had taught her. This time it took her longer to slip into full concentration, but as she listened to the tiny sounds around her, she began to feel strength rising from the earth and through her paws. Gradually, her nervousness died away.

By the time Moonpaw opened her eyes, the sun was going down. The trees cast long, black shadows over the scarlet ground. "It's time," she

whispered to herself.

When Moonpaw returned to camp, she felt calmer than she had in a long while. She skirted the open area in the center of the stone hollow, clinging to the shadows by the walls, so that no cat would see her entering the medicine cats' den.

True to his word, Jayfeather had made sure that no cat but Brambleclaw was there. He lay in his nest, turned toward the entrance to the den, his amber eyes open as if he had been expecting her. "Greetings," he murmured. "I'm glad you came."

"How are you, Brambleclaw?" Moonpaw asked, even though she didn't need an answer. It was obvious that the former leader was drifting away.

"I won't be here much longer," he replied, confirming Moonpaw's worst fears.

Her chest burned painfully, and she found it hard to get her breath. She wanted to grip Brambleclaw tightly with all four sets of claws, as if that would be enough to keep him in the living world. But she knew that would only hurt and distress him, and it would be quite useless. Instead, she sat beside him, reached out with one paw, and laid it gently on the leg nearest to her.

"I asked Jayfeather to bring you," Brambleclaw began, his voice low and rasping, "because I want you to know that when I go, I will try to take Morningkit with me."

Shock thrilled through Moonpaw from ears to tail-tip. "Do you think that will work?" she asked.

Brambleclaw gave a tiny shrug. "I can't make any promises," he told Moonpaw, "but I think that if Morningkit can just see StarClan's hunting ground, and how beautiful it is, maybe she'll want to stay there."

"That sounds good," Moonpaw mewed. "But it means you have to die, and I don't want that."

Brambleclaw let out a tiny *mrrow* of laughter. "I'm not exactly crazy about it," he admitted. "But it's going to happen, whether I want it to or not, so I'd like to do something good on my way out."

Moonpaw lowered her head, her throat choked up so she couldn't speak. She felt she didn't deserve Brambleclaw's love and generosity, that he was thinking of her at this momentous passing from life to death.

“Don’t you want someone else with you?” she managed to ask, afraid that she was being selfish by taking up Brambleclaw’s last few moments.

Brambleclaw shook his head gently. “I’ve already said my goodbyes to every cat I love,” he told her. “I’m free to concentrate on helping you.

“Stay close to me now,” he murmured. “My time is near. I hope that if you’re close when I set my paws on the path to StarClan, Morningkit will be close too, and I can take her with me.”

Briefly Moonpaw wondered what life would be like without Morningkit in her head, continually demanding her attention. *I would feel so free!*

“Thank you, Brambleclaw, for all you’re trying to do for me,” she meowed, hoping he would understand how deep her gratitude was. “I’ll miss you so much.”

Brambleclaw beckoned her with his tail, and she drew closer to him, burying her nose in his shoulder fur.

Moonpaw wanted to stay awake, to keep watch with Brambleclaw, but her whole body felt weak with grief and exhaustion, and the effort of keeping her eyes open became too much. Shortly she slept.

A paw shaking her shoulder roused Moonpaw. She blinked her eyes open to see Jayfeather standing over her. “Come on,” he mewed. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“But Brambleclaw—” Moonpaw protested.

Jayfeather gave a tiny shake of his head. Moonpaw swiveled her gaze to Brambleclaw and saw him curled up, peaceful, but with a stillness that struck fear to her heart.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” she whispered.

“Yes, he hunts with StarClan now.” There was a quiver in Jayfeather’s voice, but it strengthened as he continued. “I’ve sent a message to Squirrelstar and Tawnypelt, and that’s why you have to go. I don’t want them to find you here—for your sake as well as theirs.”

Understanding now, Moonpaw scrambled to her paws. Bending over, she touched her nose to Brambleclaw’s ear for one last time and murmured, “Goodbye. May StarClan light your path.” Then she scurried out of the den.

Outside, the last of the sunlight had gone, and a silver shimmer beyond the trees at the top of the stone hollow showed where the moon was rising. Moonpaw realized that she hadn’t been asleep for very long. She could still hear the subdued sounds of cats moving around, and on the other side of the

camp she spotted Squirrelstar and Tawnypelt heading in her direction. Fearful of being seen, she drew back into the shadow of the cliff.

The grief that so far Moonpaw had kept at bay folded around her like a stifling pelt. She wanted to break out into sorrowful wailing, but she dug her claws hard into the ground and clamped her jaws tightly shut. Giving way was not how she wanted to honor Brambleclaw.

He had looked so peaceful, lying there in his nest. Moonpaw hoped that he hadn’t been in pain at the end, and that the path to his new life had glittered with stars.

Then she remembered what Brambleclaw had promised her. For a fleeting moment she felt a spark of hope that he had taken Morningkit with him to StarClan, and that she was free of her sister, once and for all.

But that was when Moonpaw heard a small whisper in her mind. *I told you I would never leave you.*

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Chapter Thirteen

When Jayfeather had told her to take a break from watching over Brambleclaw, Tawnypelt had padded over to the fresh-kill pile. She felt too sick with grief and weariness to eat, but when she smelled the scent of a juicy vole and took the first succulent mouthful, she realized how hungry she was. She couldn't remember the last time she had tasted prey.

"Hi, Tawnypelt." The newcomer was her young kin Nightheart, padding up to join her and choosing a thrush out of the pile. "How are you?"

"Fine," Tawnypelt responded. She couldn't bear to reveal her feelings about Brambleclaw, the constant dread that never left her now.

Nightheart was followed by a smaller cat, a gray-brown tabby tom. Tawnypelt took a moment to remember his name. "Greetings, Wafflepelt," she meowed, grateful that she could talk about something other than Brambleclaw. "How are you settling into Clan life?"

"I love it here," Wafflepelt responded, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "It's a great life."

"You don't miss the park?" Tawnypelt asked, mentioning the place where Wafflepelt had lived before he joined ThunderClan. It sounded very odd to her: a place where cats were fed by Twolegs but still were not kittypets.

"Sometimes," Wafflepelt admitted. "But then, I meditate here, just like the cats do there."

"You do?" Nightheart exchanged a surprised glance with Tawnypelt.

“Of course.” Wafflepelt let out a purr. “You learned how to do it, too, when you came to the park,” he reminded his former mentor. “It’s not that weird.”

Oh, but it is. Tawnypelt was too polite to say the words out loud. *Great StarClan, ThunderClan is becoming just as weird as that SkyClan cat, Tree!*

“Come on,” Wafflepelt urged Nightheart. “Let’s show Tawnypelt what meditation looks like.”

Nightheart nodded agreement. “Okay,” he meowed.

Both cats sat erect, curled their tails around their paws, and closed their eyes. “If we were really meditating,” Wafflepelt explained, “we would start to concentrate on our breathing. In and out, slowly and deeply . . . and we would listen to all the small sounds around us, until it felt like we were one with them.” He opened his eyes again. “It’s wonderful.”

“But what is it *for*?” Tawnypelt asked.

“It calms the cat who meditates,” Nightheart replied, opening his eyes and returning to his thrush. “And it strengthens us. Really, we ought to encourage all cats to do it.”

“It looks very strange to me,” Tawnypelt mewed apologetically, “and I don’t think it would do for ShadowClan.” A small *mrrow* of amusement escaped her. “But I hear they’ve started meditating regularly in RiverClan!”

As she spoke the last words, Tawnypelt spotted Squirrelstar approaching her from across the camp. She gave a sudden start, the small amount of vole she had eaten seeming like a heavy weight in her belly. She felt guilty for allowing herself to be distracted, even for a moment, from her dying brother.

“Tawnypelt,” Squirrelstar murmured as she reached the three cats around the fresh-kill pile, “I need to speak to you in private.”

Tawnypelt rose to her paws and followed Squirrelstar a short distance away, beneath a tall tree. She had no need to ask what the Clan leader wanted to speak about. Squirrelstar’s green eyes held a shattered expression, as if she were staring at the worst horrors of the Dark Forest.

“He’s gone, isn’t he? Brambleclaw?” she asked, her voice shaking wildly.

Squirrelstar nodded sorrowfully.

Tawnypelt had known that this was coming, but at first she could hardly believe it. Brambleclaw had always been there, a steady presence tethering her to the earth. Now he was gone.

What am I without my littermate?

"We should have been with him!" she cried out. "Jayfeather should never have sent us away!"

Squirrelstar curled her tail around Tawnypelt's shoulders. "No, Jayfeather was right. He didn't expect Brambleclaw to die so quickly. And how could we help him if we made ourselves ill by watching him?"

Tawnypelt knew that Squirrelstar's words were sensible, but the claws of grief pierced even deeper because she had been denied those last few moments with her brother.

"Alderheart and Jayfeather say that we can come into their den to say our final goodbyes," Squirrelstar continued. "Then they'll announce the news to the rest of the Clan."

Their pelts brushing, the two she-cats stumbled haltingly toward the medicine cats' den.

"It's kind of the medicine cats," Tawnypelt murmured. "But I'm not sure I'm ready to see Brambleclaw's dead body."

"I know," Squirrelstar agreed. "I can still hardly believe this is happening. I've had a moon or more to prepare, but . . ." Her voice died away sadly.

"I feel the same," Tawnypelt told her. "It's like the stars are falling."

"I had a good chat with him just yesterday." Clearly Squirrelstar was trying to force cheerfulness into her voice. "It lightened my heart and made me believe that I might have more time with him. Maybe you're never prepared to lose a cat you love." Her voice broke at last. "Oh, Tawnypelt, this feels like too much, too soon!"

By now the moon was rising above the trees, shedding a silvery glimmer over the stone hollow. The cold radiance cast black shadows from the cliffs and the den walls. By its light, Tawnypelt spotted a small cat dart out of the entrance to the medicine cats' den, pause for a heartbeat, then scurry off into a nearby patch of shadow. Narrowing her eyes, Tawnypelt could just make out her shape, cowering against the rock.

Wait—is that Moonpaw?

Tawnypelt's heart thumped harder, and fury coursed through her like a flooded stream. She had assumed that Brambleclaw had died naturally from his infection, but what if something more—something evil—had been involved in his death?

Jayfeather was standing in the entrance to the den, half hidden by the bramble screen. Her fur bristling, her tail lashing, Tawnypelt stalked up to him. “What just happened?” she demanded. “I thought I saw Moonpaw leaving this den, but clearly I was wrong. Moonpaw was banned from visiting Brambleclaw. Wasn’t she?”

“Tawnypelt, calm down.” Squirrelstar had followed her, but Tawnypelt ignored the Clan leader.

Jayfeather’s head was drooping wearily, and there was exhaustion in his voice as he replied. “I know what I was told, but Brambleclaw asked to speak to Moonpaw. I couldn’t deny the cat who raised me one last request. And I’m quite sure Moonpaw wouldn’t do Brambleclaw any harm.”

Tawnypelt was a storm of mingled emotions; she couldn’t tell her grief from her anger any longer. “You disobeyed orders!” she yowled. Spinning around, she glared at Moonpaw. “I can see you! Come out of there!” As Moonpaw crept forward, cringing, Tawnypelt continued, “What did you say to my littermate? What exactly did you two have to talk about? Have you been worrying him about the Dark Forest again?”

“No!” Moonpaw protested.

Tawnypelt didn’t listen to her. “You terrified him!” she snarled. “You made him think that he would go to the Dark Forest when he died. Can you think of any cat *less* likely to be condemned to go there?”

“But we didn’t talk about the Dark Forest today.” Moonpaw was managing to stand up for herself, but she was shaking and her voice was unsteady.

Good, Tawnypelt growled inwardly. *She should be scared after what she’s done.*

“Brambleclaw can see my dead littermate, Morningkit,” Moonpaw went on. “You know how she refuses to leave the living world. So Brambleclaw asked to see me today, and he told me that he was going to try to bring Morningkit with him to StarClan.”

“But it was you who put the Dark Forest into his mind and made him have visions of going there!”

Tawnypelt didn’t know whether Moonpaw was telling the truth, and she didn’t much care. Her anger was tangled up with guilt at all that Brambleclaw had gone through with Ashfur, guilt that she had been unable to help him. That hadn’t killed him, but he was never the same cat afterward. Frustration flooded through her that nothing had come from her

suspicions of Moonpaw, and the one rule that Squirrelstar had told her had come out of the meeting about Moonpaw, that Moonpaw was banned from seeing Brambleclaw, had been broken as though it didn't matter.

"What if you have doomed Brambleclaw to the Place of No Stars?" she demanded. "That's why you were supposed to *stay away*!"

Tawnypelt dropped into a crouch, wanting to spring at Moonpaw and rip her fur. Moonpaw backed away, terror in her eyes.

Then Tawnypelt felt fur brushing her flank. Turning, she saw that Alderheart had appeared and was trying to draw her away from Moonpaw.

"Stop," he meowed simply. "I know you're struggling, but I am, too. We all are. None of this will bring Brambleclaw back."

Like a cold surge of water, reality struck Tawnypelt. Brambleclaw was truly gone. She would never speak to him, never see him again. He was gone. Forever.

Throwing back her head, she let out a wail.

The moon, swelling to the full, floated overhead as the cats of ThunderClan gathered around Brambleclaw's dead body for his vigil. As Tawnypelt moved into the circle, she was aware of Moonpaw a few places away, but she couldn't bring herself to look at the apprentice directly.

She could feel suspicion in the air, too. There was an empty space around Moonpaw, and when Honeyfur approached, she hesitated and then moved away. No cat wanted to sit near her until Thriftear and Bayshine appeared and crouched beside her, one on either side. Word of Moonpaw's final visit to Brambleclaw must have gotten around, and Tawnypelt knew that she wasn't the only cat to have noticed Moonpaw's strange behavior.

But tonight was about Brambleclaw. When Squirrelstar had taken her place with the two medicine cats near Brambleclaw's head, she turned at once to Tawnypelt.

"Brambleclaw was your brother," she declared. "I'd like you to speak first."

Tawnypelt rose to her paws, trying to clear her mind and think only of her littermate. "Brambleclaw and I were kits together, we played and wrestled and got into mischief together, and we were made apprentices together," she meowed. "Our wonderful mother, Goldenflower, did her best

to defend us from the mistrust of our Clanmates. But I couldn't bear the looks of suspicion the other cats gave us, because our father was the Clan's enemy, the first Tigerstar. And so I made the decision to leave ThunderClan and follow my father into ShadowClan. From then on, I regret the time Brambleclaw and I lost together. Those seasons will never come back."

She felt her voice begin to quaver, paused, and swallowed. "Brambleclaw became leader of ThunderClan," she went on at last. "And for a while I was deputy of ShadowClan. Many times we found our Clans at odds. But I never stopped admiring my brother. His courage, his decency, his loyalty to his Clan. When we lost our mother, he was the only close kin I had left.

"I often wondered what I inherited from my evil father, Tigerstar, and I'm sure Bramblestar did, too. But the only similarity I ever saw between them was their determination. Bramblestar battled his way through the Dark Forest when the usurper Ashfur stole his body. He risked everything to save the Clans and our way of life. But it changed him." Tawnypelt's voice caught, and she paused again before she could continue. "In many ways it broke him. He sacrificed himself to save us all. And that is the brother I have always known. Now he hunts with Goldenflower in StarClan. I will never stop missing either one of them."

Tawnypelt sat down quickly, before her legs refused to support her. She was conscious of a wave of sympathy coming from the ThunderClan cats and allowed herself to be comforted a little by its warmth.

They know that every word I have spoken is true.

To Tawnypelt's surprise, Moonpaw was the next cat to stand up, hesitant, but with determination in her eyes and the way she held her head.

"I was too young to know Brambleclaw as Clan leader," she began, "but I heard the stories of what he did for ThunderClan. I knew him as a kind elder. He never failed to greet me when I was sent to change his bedding or check him over for ticks. And he was just as kind when we were in the medicine cats' den together, when he was battling his infection and I was having trouble with sleep.

"I know that many of you think of me as strange and scary," Moonpaw continued. "But Brambleclaw only ever saw me as a Clanmate in need of help. He listened to me, and he never judged me. Even in his last moments, he was thinking of me and trying to help me. I'm not sure that I'll ever have such a good friend again."

Ducking her head to the listening Clan, Moonpaw sat down. Tawnypelt was surprised to be touched by the apprentice's words, and sorry that she had spoken so harshly.

I was wrong to blame her. Brambleclaw knew what he was doing, even at the point of death.

While Tawnypelt was thinking over what Moonpaw had said, Squirrelstar had risen to her paws.

"I have loved Brambleclaw for almost as long as I can remember," she meowed. "He was a young warrior when I was an apprentice, and Great StarClan, I was rude to him! Back then, I thought I knew it all!"

A ripple of amusement came from where the elders were sitting, and Tawnypelt heard Cloudtail mutter, "True that!"

"Brambleclaw was one of the cats chosen to make the journey to the sun-drown-water and listen to what Midnight would tell them," Squirrelstar continued. "And I insisted on going with them. Brambleclaw tried his best to send me back, but he knew I would just follow him alone if I had to. On that journey I learned to see him for the cat he was: brave, honorable, a true leader. I returned to the Clans loving him, and in time we became mates."

Squirrelstar gazed around the circle of cats. "Many of you know what happened next," she went on. "The mistake I made. When my sister, Leafpool, had Crowfeather's kits, I pretended they were mine, and I told no cat the truth, not even Brambleclaw. I let him believe that he was the true father of Lionblaze, Hollyleaf, and Jayfeather. But of course the secret came out, and Brambleclaw was furious that I hadn't trusted him. We were estranged for a long time, and it was my fault, because I should have known that Brambleclaw would have protected Leafpool by keeping her secret, just as I did.

"In the end, Brambleclaw forgave me and made me Clan deputy. And we often disagreed about Clan matters; I admit, I have trouble backing down gracefully when I'm certain I'm right, especially when it comes to the fate of the Clan I love. But Brambleclaw understood, and eventually we became mates again." She sighed, shaking her head a little. "In loving my Clan so much, perhaps I didn't value the love between me and Brambleclaw, my favorite cat in the living world. If I could go back and do it again, I would make a better job of it. I would find a way to love them both." Her voice grew desolate. "I know I can lead the Clan without Brambleclaw, but I'm

not sure I'll ever be quite myself again, not the way I was with him. I know I will never love like that again."

As she stopped speaking, she sank to the ground and sat with bowed head.

Following the Clan leader's speech, first Jayfeather and Lionblaze, who were Leafpool's kits, and then Alderheart and Sparkpelt, Brambleclaw's own kits with Squirrelstar, rose in turn to speak about their father. Tawnypelt recognized the qualities they spoke of: He was loving, strong, stern when he had to be, wise in all the ways of the Clan. She wished with all her heart that she had been there to see him with these young cats, guiding their paw steps until they became the excellent warriors and medicine cats that they were.

Those days will never come back.

Finally every cat had spoken, and the Clan watched in silence until the moon set and the first cold light of dawn appeared above the trees.

Jayfeather rose to his paws and spoke the words that every medicine cat had spoken for season upon season, to say farewell to their dead Clanmates. "May StarClan light your path, Brambleclaw. May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep."

Then the elders also rose, took up Brambleclaw's body, and bore it out of the camp for burial.

Squirrelstar watched for a few heartbeats, then choked out, "I can't!" and fled for her den.

Tawnypelt remained until the elders vanished with Brambleclaw into the thorn tunnel, and the vigil was over.

For some reason, a memory flashed into Tawnypelt's mind of herself and Bramblekit playing in ThunderClan's camp in the old forest. Tawnykit was going to hide, but when she told Bramblekit to close his eyes, he shook his head.

"I don't want to play that," he mewed.

"Why not?" Tawnykit asked. "It's a good game."

"But I don't want you to go away," Bramblekit explained. "You're the cat I love most in the world. I'm most *myself* with you. Tawnykit, I want you to promise never to leave me."

"I never will," Tawnykit promised.

Then they played moss-ball instead.

But I did leave him, Tawnypelt reflected. *Moons later, when I was Tawnypaw. Poor Bramblekit.*

And now Brambleclaw had left her. Tawnypelt admitted that it probably served her right. But she couldn’t imagine what the world would be like without her brother in it.

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Chapter Fourteen

The full moon floated high in the sky, turning the lake into a sheet of silver, catching a glint from the grass rimmed with frost and the frozen water droplets hanging from the trees. Starlingpaw headed along the shore in the midst of his Clanmates, on his way to the Gathering.

He felt that life was good. Ever since he, Nectarsong, and Fidgetflake had returned from their quest to the Tribe of Rushing Water, the two older cats had treated him with great respect. The rest of the Clan had changed their attitude, too. Starlingpaw felt that he had become more than a mere apprentice.

Nectarsong and Fidgetflake had been impressed by the way that he had stood up to Crowfeather. “I’m not sure I could have done that,” Nectarsong had told a small group of warriors gathered around the fresh-kill pile. “But Starlingpaw doesn’t care how old you are, or how much power you have. He just tells it like it is.”

Starlingpaw liked the way Nectarsong spoke of him. He wanted to be a truth-teller, even if the truth was inconvenient. And because of him, his Clanmates were thinking. He had heard them discussing which of the questing cats might be the cat who could follow the wrong path, but they couldn’t agree on which one it might be. And, as far as Starlingpaw knew, no cat had shared their discussions with Leafstar, Hawkwing, or either of the medicine cats.

I’m sure this is going to come up at the Gathering, Starlingpaw thought, his anticipation driving his paws forward. *Maybe everything will become clear then.*

“Hey, slow down, Starlingpaw!” Needleclaw called as he thrust his way through his Clanmates, overtaking them in his eagerness to reach the Gathering island.

Starlingpaw halted until his mother caught up to him, her whiskers twitching with affection.

“You’re such a strong tom now!” Needleclaw purred. “Not the scrawny kit who wrestled with Robinkit in the nursery anymore.” She ran her tail along Starlingpaw’s back. “I think you’ve grown even bigger since you took off for the mountains. I wish your father could see you now.” She sighed, then gave her pelt a shake. “I’m sure he must be watching you from StarClan, full of pride.”

Starlingpaw flinched at the memory of his father’s death, unable to shake off the guilt that it had been his fault. But then he realized that his mother didn’t sound grief-stricken to bring up his father now. She sounded sincere.

“I hope he can see me, too,” Starlingpaw responded, touching noses with Needleclaw. “I hope he’s guiding me from StarClan.”

The clearing in the middle of the Gathering island was filled with a shifting mass of cats: black fur, gray fur, ginger and white, and tortoiseshell. Starlingpaw found a place to sit near the edge, beside his mother and Robinpaw.

As soon as Icestar announced that the Gathering should begin, Jayfeather rose from his place among the medicine cats. “We have held no half-moon meetings this moon,” he announced. “The Moonpool is still closed to us by the Twoleg wall. If StarClan has any advice for us, we haven’t been able to hear it.”

“Have any of you received word from StarClan any other way?” Squirrelstar asked, gazing down from her perch on the branch of the Great Oak.

“We haven’t had any dreams or visions in WindClan,” Kestrelflight confirmed.

“Nor in RiverClan,” Frostdawn added.

The other medicine cats murmured agreement, glancing uncomfortably at each other. Starlingpaw thought they seemed to feel awkward that they had no better news.

But it's not their fault. It's those bee-brained Twolegs!

"How can we survive without the guidance of StarClan?" a black tom called out from among a group of ThunderClan cats. Starlingpaw remembered his name: Nightheart. "Didn't we learn this lesson seasons ago?"

At his words, Tigerstar stepped forward on his branch. "Let's all remember what we agreed at the last Gathering." There was an edge to his voice, as if he were scolding a disobedient apprentice. "We will wait one more moon before we start panicking about what the Twolegs are doing at the Moonpool."

"But what if nothing changes?" Duskfur of RiverClan called out. "What if we're wasting time when we could have been looking for a new connection to StarClan?"

Cloverfoot, the ShadowClan deputy, lashed her tail. "Every kit knows that the Twolegs go back to their dens when the cold days come," she announced from her place with the other deputies on the oak roots. "Surely they won't hang about and freeze their hairless pelts all through leaf-bare."

A few cats here and there in the clearing grunted in agreement, but Starlingpaw could hear many more doubtful murmurs, too. It seemed as if hope was fading that the Twolegs would ever leave.

Squirrelstar stepped forward, raising her tail to silence the comments. "Let's continue with the business of the Gathering," she meowed. Starlingpaw wondered why she was looking so grave. "I have news of ThunderClan," the leader went on. "Fernstripe and Shellfur are the parents of three healthy kits: Shykit, Puffkit, and Leapkit."

But that's good news, Starlingpaw thought, bewildered.

"We rejoice in new kits for our Clan," Squirrelstar continued. For some reason her voice choked, and she hesitated before she continued. "But that is not my only news. I have to tell you that Brambleclaw, who was once Bramblestar, leader of ThunderClan, is dead."

At her words, the whole clearing erupted in yowls of dismay. Only the ThunderClan cats were silent, their sorrow clear in their bowed heads and drooping whiskers. Tawnypelt, too, sat like a cat made out of stone; Starlingpaw could see her deep grief for her brother.

Starlingpaw understood now why Squirrelstar was looking so grief-stricken. He hadn't known Brambleclaw well, but he knew how well-respected the former leader was among all the Clans.

Icestar turned to Squirrelstar as the clamor began to die down. "This is terrible news, Squirrelstar," she mewed. "And a great loss to us all. Without Brambleclaw's courage, the impostor Ashfur would have taken over and destroyed us and our way of life. He truly deserved his title as a Light in the Mist."

Squirrelstar dipped her head. "Thank you, Icestar."

"He was a cat I trusted with my life," Crowfeather called out from his place with the other deputies. "Ever since we journeyed together to the sun-drown-water, I have been proud to call him my friend."

"I'm so sorry, Squirrelstar," Mothwing of RiverClan meowed. "He was an honorable warrior. Every cat here will miss him."

A chorus of agreement rose from the cats in the clearing. Starlingpaw was impressed by the depth of respect and affection Brambleclaw had aroused in cats from every Clan. He felt suddenly humble, wondering whether he could ever be such an outstanding cat.

"Thank you all. I appreciate your sympathy," Squirrelstar declared. "But now let us continue with the business of the Gathering. Leafstar, would you like to speak next?"

The SkyClan leader rose with a respectful dip of her head. "SkyClan, too, is happy to announce the birth of two healthy kits to Wrenflight and Gravelnose: Vinekit and Conekit, both toms." She paused as the crowd let out approving murmurs before continuing, "Also, Birchfeather has now completed his three tasks and has become a full SkyClan warrior."

"Birchfeather! Birchfeather!" The cats acclaimed his success, though Starlingpaw thought there was no enthusiasm in their voices. They were all still shocked by the news of Brambleclaw's death. He saw too that Tigerstar winced at the announcement of Birchfeather's Clan switch; it must be hard for him to accept the loss of his warrior, who was also his son.

Leafstar withdrew, and Tigerstar stepped up to a fork in his branch, where he could plant his paws securely.

"Two of our apprentices, Redpaw and Sprucepaw, have now received their warrior names," he announced. "They will be known as Redcloud and Sprucetip."

“Redcloud! Sprucetip!” the assembled cats yowled in congratulation, but Starlingpaw noticed that they sounded no more enthusiastic than when they’d acclaimed Birchfeather. The cloud of Brambleclaw’s death still hung over the clearing.

“Along with that,” Tigerstar continued, “Lightleap and Blazefire’s kits have been made apprentices. Hopwhisker will mentor Quickpaw, Flowerstem will mentor Beechpaw, and Slatefur will mentor Poolpaw.”

With a nod to the cats below, he retreated.

Harestar followed him, rising from a clump of brown oak leaves that had almost hidden his brown-and-white pelt. “Silkypaw and Fluffpaw have been made warriors; their names are Silkypod and Flufftail,” he meowed.

“Silkypod! Flufftail!”

These two new warriors were close enough to Starlingpaw for him to notice that neither of them seemed proud to receive the congratulations of the Clans. They were exchanging uneasy glances, as if they didn’t feel it was right to be happy after Squirrelstar’s devastating news.

Icestar was the last Clan leader to speak. “RiverClan has no news to tell you,” she announced, “except that prey is running well, and our cats are full-fed and healthy.”

Once the leaders had finished their reports, Tawnypelt rose from where she sat among the ThunderClan warriors. “May I address the Clans?” she asked, dipping her head respectfully.

“Of course,” Squirrelstar responded immediately.

“Thank you. I have begun meeting with elders of all the Clans,” Tawnypelt began, “following the advice Bluestar gave me in her vision.”

Starlingpaw noticed that Tigerstar’s fur began to bush up as soon as Tawnypelt spoke. “She’s not speaking for ShadowClan!” he growled.

Tawnypelt fixed him with a green glare, her lips drawn back in the beginning of a snarl. The hostility between mother and son seemed like the warning before a storm. *So* that’s *why she’s not sitting with her own Clan*, Starlingpaw thought.

Harestar stepped forward, murmured something inaudible to Tigerstar, and dipped his head to Tawnypelt in the clearing below. “It might be helpful for every cat if we hear the report from the questing cats who traveled to the Tribe of Rushing Water,” he suggested. “If Stoneteller had any advice for

us, it might make clearer what you need to find out from the elders.” When neither Tawnypelt nor any other cat objected, he turned to Crowfeather. “Please tell us what happened,” he mewed.

Crowfeather rose from his place on the oak root. Starlingpaw could see that he still looked worn and tired, as if he wasn’t fully recovered from his injury. “The Tribe was very welcoming to us,” he began. “They were happy to share prey. And it was good to see Stormfur—”

“Stop dithering about!” Jayfeather interrupted harshly. “What *happened*? What did Stoneteller say?”

“I was coming to that,” Crowfeather snapped. “Stoneteller took me into the Cave of Pointed Stones, and there we met with Feathertail.”

He paused, swallowing; Starlingpaw remembered hearing that Crowfeather had loved the beautiful RiverClan cat, who had given her life to save him from the giant cat that was terrorizing the Tribe.

It only took a moment for Crowfeather to recover himself. “Feathertail told me that StarClan is alive and well and watching over the Clans,” he declared. “They hope that soon they will be able to give us guidance again.”

With a nod to the leaders in the Great Oak, Crowfeather sat down again.

Gaping with shock, Starlingpaw stared at him. *Isn’t he going to say anything about Stoneteller’s prophecy?*

Before he could think better of it, he leaped to his paws. “Aren’t you going to tell them what Stoneteller said?” he yowled. “That there’s a cat among us who could cause great trouble for the Clans?”

At his challenge, yowls and caterwauls rose from every part of the clearing. Starlingpaw felt as if he were in the middle of a vast lake of churning water, with wind howling all around him. Once the first shock was over, he realized that every cat was staring at him, and he began to make out individual voices.

“What in StarClan’s name is he talking about?” Cloudtail of ThunderClan demanded.

“He’s an apprentice! He doesn’t *know* what he’s talking about,” his Clanmate Thornclaw snapped in reply.

“We need to listen to him!” That was Sedgewhisker from WindClan, her voice rising above the tumult. “Starlingpaw, what’s all this about?”

“*I* want to hear from Crowfeather,” Cloverfoot, the ShadowClan deputy, added. “Crowfeather, is this true? Are you keeping something from us?”

Owlnose, the RiverClan deputy, hissed out a challenge. “Yes, Crowfeather, I think you need to explain yourself.”

Crowfeather had sprung up as soon as Starlingpaw questioned him. Now he stood waiting for the clamor to die down, glaring all the while at the SkyClan apprentice.

It was hard not to flinch under that furious blue gaze, especially surrounded by the noise from the Clans, but Starlingpaw refused to be intimidated. *I’m speaking the truth again,* he justified himself. *I’m being a brave warrior—just like my father.*

Harestar rose once more from his place in the Great Oak and raised his tail for silence. “What’s going on?” he asked Crowfeather when he could make himself heard without yowling.

It was Nectarsong who responded. “Starlingpaw is right to bring this up,” she meowed, with an approving look at her apprentice. “When we were on the quest, Crowfeather was talking in his sleep, and Starlingpaw overheard him speak about the rest of Stoneteller’s prophecy.”

“Yes, and what I find strange,” Fidgetflake added, “is that Crowfeather is trying to hide this part of Stoneteller’s advice.”

“Why would Crowfeather not tell us?” Sparkpelt of ThunderClan called out. “Is he hiding something?”

“I have nothing to hide,” Crowfeather replied with freezing dignity. “I didn’t reveal this part of the prophecy because I haven’t thought it through yet. Stoneteller told me that a cat among us *might* set his paws on the wrong path and cause harm to the Clans. It sounded like there’s still time to prevent that. I wanted to make sure that no cat would be accused baselessly. Isn’t there enough tension among the Clans already?”

“That may be true,” Starlingpaw responded. He felt bolder now that his Clanmates had stood up for him. “Or maybe, Crowfeather, you suspect that *you’re* the cat the prophecy is about.”

Crowfeather let out a furious hiss, but before he could respond, his son Breezepelt sprang up from where he sat with more of the WindClan warriors. “Crowfeather has his faults,” he meowed, “but he is honest. He has nothing to hide. I can’t imagine that he would keep anything from us to protect his reputation.”

“Thank you.” Crowfeather dipped his head toward his son, then added wryly, “We’ll have a talk about my supposed faults when we’re back in the WindClan camp. I’ve been thinking it over,” he continued, addressing all the cats, “and I assume that Stoneteller’s prophecy is related to Tawnypelt’s: ‘Beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world.’ Surely Stoneteller and Tawnypelt are referring to the same cat. And Stoneteller said ‘a cat among us,’ which could mean it’s one of the questing cats. In that case, many of us have a paw in each world. Fidgetflake is a medicine cat. Ivypool trained in the Dark Forest. Shadowsight is a Light in the Mist.”

“And so are you!” Starlingpaw yowled.

The words were hardly out of Starlingpaw’s mouth when Tigerstar barreled right to the end of his branch and bunched his muscles as if he were about to leap down on Crowfeather.

“How *dare* you accuse Shadowsight of going down the wrong path and causing harm to the Clans?” he snarled. “Hasn’t Shadowsight done enough to prove his loyalty? Remember how often he almost *died* to save the Clans!”

Shadowsight looked up from where he sat with the medicine cats. “Tigerstar, calm down,” he begged. “It’s not—”

“I will *not* calm down.” Tigerstar’s fur was bushed up until he looked almost twice his size. His amber eyes blazed and his teeth were bared. Starlingpaw couldn’t remember seeing a more threatening cat. “This whole discussion is ridiculous,” he growled, “and ShadowClan is done with it. *I* believe that the Twolegs will be gone by the first snowfall, and the Moonpool will be ours again. All of this—the so-called prophecies, the quest to the Tribe, the talk of cats with paws in both worlds—is causing conflict we don’t need. We’re attacking each other trying to solve a problem we don’t yet know we have. ShadowClan, follow me: We’re leaving.”

He leaped down from the Great Oak, signaling with a sweep of his tail for his Clan to follow him. For a moment the ShadowClan cats stared at each other, milling about in confusion as if they couldn’t believe their leader would storm out of a Gathering.

“Now!” Tigerstar snarled.

Shocked, his cats didn’t hesitate any longer; they all streamed across the clearing and through the surrounding bushes, on their way to the tree-bridge.

Tawnypelt was still standing in the midst of the ThunderClan warriors. She looked thoroughly shaken; Starlingpaw guessed it was because Crowfeather had pointed a paw at Shadowsight, who was her kin.

Looking up at the remaining leaders, Tawnypelt asked, “May I continue speaking?”

Leafstar waved her tail. “Please do. It sounded interesting.”

“As I was saying,” Tawnypelt meowed, “I have begun speaking to the elders about the prophecy Bluestar gave me. No matter what some cats say, I’m not convinced that the Twolegs will leave. And either way, on such an important issue, in my opinion it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“I support you, Tawnypelt!” Starlingpaw called out.

Tawnypelt gave him a grateful but confused nod. For a couple of heartbeats an awkward silence fell, and then more cats began to add their voices, agreeing with Tawnypelt and her plan.

“I welcome you to talk to our elder,” Icestar declared. Glancing around at the other leaders, she added, “Do we all consent?”

“Willingly,” Harestar responded. “It can’t hurt!”

“Tawnypelt has already spoken to the ThunderClan elders,” Squirrelstar pointed out, and Leafstar added, “And to SkyClan’s.”

With all the remaining leaders in agreement, there was no more to discuss. Icestar spoke the words that brought the Gathering to an end.

As the cats began to cluster together into their own Clan groups, Starlingpaw spotted Tawnypelt nearby. *This is my chance to speak to her!*

Wriggling his way through the crowd, Starlingpaw reached the tortoiseshell she-cat as she was about to leave with the ThunderClan cats. “Tawnypelt, I need to talk to you!”

Tawnypelt twitched an ear. “Okay. Why?”

“You told me about the prophecy when you were staying in the SkyClan medicine den,” Starlingpaw explained.

“I don’t remember,” Tawnypelt told him, looking confused. “I was very weak and taking a lot of poppy seeds at the time.”

Starlingpaw leaned closer. “I think your prophecy and your plan to talk to the elders are very important,” he murmured into her ear. “I’m ready to help you.”

Tawnypelt still looked confused. “I know most of the elders, so I don’t think I’ll have a problem,” she meowed. “But I’ll keep you in mind.”

With a brief nod, she turned away and followed the ThunderClan cats out of the clearing.

Starlingpaw turned to look for his own Clan and spotted them bunched together around Hawkwing and Leafstar. Awkwardly, he realized that they were waiting for him. Even worse, as he met Hawkwing's narrow-eyed look, he guessed that the deputy had been watching his whole conversation with Tawnypelt.

As soon as Starlingpaw pushed his way through the ferns into the SkyClan camp, he felt a tail tapping him on the shoulder. Turning, he saw Hawkwing; his mentor, Nectarsong, was by the deputy's side.

"What was that all about?" Hawkwing asked.

Starlingpaw's belly lurched as he realized that the Clan deputy didn't sound friendly. "I just wanted a word with Tawnypelt," he explained. "We spoke when she was—"

"I'm not talking about what you said to Tawnypelt," Hawkwing interrupted brusquely. "I'm talking about how you spoke out of turn at the Gathering, accusing Crowfeather of—what, exactly?"

Nectarsong responded before Starlingpaw could find words to reply. "Starlingpaw merely pointed out that Crowfeather had left out something important. He told the truth!"

"And why was the Gathering the proper time to 'tell the truth'?" Hawkwing demanded. "If you had concerns, why didn't you share them with your leader?"

In the face of Hawkwing's anger, Nectarsong bowed her head to stare at her paws, clearly ashamed now that she had supported her apprentice.

But Starlingpaw wasn't at all ashamed. Anger was building inside him like a swarm of bees disturbed from their nest. "What good would that do?" he blurted out. "Leafstar is my leader, but the Clan doesn't listen to her. Only Tawnypelt truly listens to the elders!"

Hawkwing let out a hiss of fury. "Starlingpaw, it's time you learned proper respect. You're an apprentice, yet you've been behaving as if you think you're a senior warrior. It takes time and hard work for you to earn the right to tell other cats what to do or what to think." He paused, flexing his claws into the ground. "For the next moon, you're confined to camp," he snapped. "And you will do *all* the apprentice duties. That should give

Robinpaw more time for training with Gravelnose, and if that means she's made a warrior before you, it's no more than you deserve. Now get out of my sight."

Starlingpaw burned with humiliation, yet when Hawkwing had finished lecturing him, he spotted Leafstar watching them from across the camp. He couldn't help wondering whether she looked a little impressed.

I don't care that I'm being punished, he told himself. *I know I told the truth. And I'm not going to be afraid to do that anymore.*

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Chapter Fifteen

The last streaks of daylight were fading from the sky. Moonpaw sat outside her den, giving herself a good wash before settling down into her nest.

As she drew her tongue across her shoulder in long, sweeping strokes, Moonpaw thought about the prophecy Crowfeather had been forced to share with the Clans at the Gathering a few nights before. It seemed to mean that she couldn't be the two-faced cat from Tawnypelt's prophecy, because Crowfeather thought that the cat in Stoneteller's prophecy had been on the quest.

And I wasn't.

That reassuring thought was interrupted by Morningkit, speaking inside her head. *They still don't trust you. And they never will. Remember what Tawnypelt said when Brambleclaw died?*

Every hair on Moonpaw's pelt prickled with shame. Of course she remembered. For several nights she had been unable to get it out of her head. But as time went on, Moonpaw began to understand that Tawnypelt's hostility, the terrible things she had said, were driven by grief.

Moonpaw felt grief, too. She missed Brambleclaw every day; his death had left a hollow inside her that nothing could fill. And she missed the hope he had offered her that somehow he might be able to solve her problems with Morningkit.

He couldn't, she sighed. *But maybe StarClan has other plans for me.*

Concentrating on her grooming, Moonpaw didn't notice Goldenpaw and Shinepaw until they bounded right up to her. *It's good to be friends again,* Moonpaw thought as she greeted them.

On the day after Brambleclaw's vigil, her two fellow apprentices had come up to her, both looking unhappy and uncertain of their welcome.

"Moonpaw, we want to say we're sorry," Goldenpaw had begun. "We thought it was for the best that we told Squirrelstar about Morningkit."

"We only wanted to help," Shinepaw had added.

"You broke your promise," Moonpaw had mewed to Goldenpaw.

"I know." Goldenpaw had bowed his head. "But we miss you, Moonpaw. We miss doing stuff together." He gazed into her eyes. "*I* miss you."

A shiver had passed through Moonpaw. *You can be proud and bear a grudge,* she had thought. *Or you can have friends again.*

"It's okay." Speaking the words was one of the hardest things she had ever done. "I understand."

Now Goldenpaw gave her a friendly flick around the ear with his tail. Moonpaw batted at him with her forepaw, her claws sheathed.

I'm going to forget about Morningkit, she decided. *I'll think about something else.*

"Battle training was great this afternoon," Shinepaw meowed. "It's even better now that there are three of us again. That new move is amazing! Leap onto an enemy's back and claw at his ears."

"Yes, but you have to land on the enemy's back first," Moonpaw pointed out. "Not leap right over her and land in a holly bush. Isn't that right, Goldenpaw?"

"It was a great leap, anyway!" Goldenpaw retorted.

Shinepaw let out a *mrrow* of amusement. "It's SkyClan cats that are good at leaping," she purred. "You wouldn't think of becoming a SkyClan cat, would you, Goldenpaw?"

"Certainly not!" Goldenpaw declared stoutly. "It will always be ThunderClan for me."

"And your great leaps would confuse the enemy," Moonpaw teased him, her tail curling up in amusement.

"Yes, not being where you're supposed to be," Shinepaw agreed. "You're good at that. Like doing a dawn patrol . . ."

"Hey!" Goldenpaw crouched down as if he were about to pounce on his sister.

By now all three cats were laughing so hard that Moonpaw couldn't hear anything from Morningkit in her mind. *It's so good to have friends who are apprentices like me*, she thought. *Real friends, not just a voice in my head.*

As they calmed down from their fit of laughter, Shinepaw stretched her jaws open in a massive yawn. "I'm heading for my nest," she mewed.

She led the way into the den, and all three cats settled down, with Moonpaw in the middle. It felt good to snuggle down into the moss and fern and feel the warm bodies of her denmates on either side.

"Good night," she murmured.

"Sweet dreams," Goldenpaw responded.

Moonpaw drifted easily into sleep. Soon she found herself in a forest, but it wasn't the same as the forest in ThunderClan territory that she knew so well. These trees seemed so old, with gray bark and gnarled branches dipping under the weight of massive swags of moss and ivy. The grass was long, brushing against Moonpaw's sides as she walked.

Without Moonpaw realizing how she got there, Morningkit was walking by her side. "You told every cat about me," she snarled, her eyes lit with anger. "And now you're ignoring me."

"I'm not ignoring you exactly," Moonpaw protested. "You just haven't been speaking as much lately."

"You ignored me right before you went to your nest!" Morningkit pointed out. Her voice sank to a mutter. "What's the point of talking all the time? You're so busy talking to your *friends* now. You don't care about your littermate."

Moonpaw didn't want to discuss that. *It's not wrong to have friends in the living world.* "How did you escape going with Brambleclaw?" she asked, hoping to distract Morningkit from her grievances.

Morningkit let out a little snicker. "I tricked him!" she boasted. "I agreed to go with him, and then at the last moment I ran off. The only way I'm going to StarClan is with you, Moonpaw!"

"No . . ." A shiver of fear thrilled through Moonpaw. Something prodded her in her shoulder, and she startled awake with a squeal. "No!"

"It's okay." The voice was Goldenpaw's. "It's only me."

Moonpaw realized that she was in her own nest, the bedding scattered as if she had been thrashing around in her sleep. Goldenpaw was looking

down at her with concern in his eyes. “You were talking in your sleep,” he explained.

“I’m sorry.” Moonpaw couldn’t hide how shaken she was, her breath coming in short pants and her whiskers quivering. “Did I disturb you?”

Goldenpaw didn’t reply, just gave her ear a comforting lick. “Did you dream of Morningkit?” he asked. “Don’t worry about it,” he added when Moonpaw nodded. “You haven’t been hiding her anymore, and Morningkit hasn’t been speaking to you as often, has she? I promise, it’ll get better.”

As the sun was rising, Moonpaw and Goldenpaw were sharing a squirrel beside the fresh-kill pile. It was a clear day, with a tang of frost in the air. The camp was stirring, getting ready for the new day. The dawn patrol had already left, and near the warriors’ den Ivypool was arranging the hunting patrols.

“Tawnypelt, can you lead?” Moonpaw heard the Clan deputy meow. “I’m sure you know the territory well enough by now.”

A couple of other cats exchanged surprised glances, and Moonpaw wondered whether Tawnypelt had been invited to join ThunderClan. *I hope not,* she thought. *Not when she dislikes me so much.*

“Sure, Ivypool,” the ShadowClan warrior replied.

“Then take Nightheart and Twigbranch.” Ivypool waved her tail to beckon the cats she had named.

As Tawnypelt padded past the fresh-kill pile at the head of her patrol, she cast a long look at Moonpaw. It took all of Moonpaw’s courage not to flinch, but to her surprise Tawnypelt’s expression wasn’t completely hostile.

Is that regret? she wondered. *Is she sorry for the way she acted when Brambleclaw died?*

“What’s up with that weird ShadowClan cat?” Goldenpaw asked, swallowing a bite if squirrel. “What did you do to ruffle her fur?”

“Tawnypelt thinks I hurt Brambleclaw,” Moonpaw explained, then added hastily, “but I didn’t! I really didn’t!”

“Of course you didn’t,” Goldenpaw mewed soothingly. “You wouldn’t do a thing like that to a dying cat. Or any cat.”

“I once talked about the Dark Forest with Brambleclaw,” Moonpaw confided in him. “And Brambleclaw was afraid he might have to go back there. You know I was banned from seeing him after that. But then when

Brambleclaw knew he was dying, he asked to see me because he thought he could help me with Morningkit. In the end he couldn't, but Tawnypelt thought I might have sent him to the Dark Forest."

"That's bee-brained!" Goldenpaw exclaimed. "No living cat could do that."

"I know," Moonpaw responded. "And that last time, we never mentioned the Dark Forest at all."

"This is all ridiculous!" Goldenpaw twitched his whiskers in annoyance. "Doesn't Tawnypelt realize that there's nothing sinister about you? You're just an ordinary cat with an unusual problem." He shook his head. "You know, Tawnypelt is just suffering from grief. She won't be suspicious of you forever."

"I know," Moonpaw sighed. "It's just awkward right now."

"Just remember that Shinepaw and I see you as you really are," Goldenpaw assured her.

Moonpaw felt warmth spreading through her as Goldenpaw gave her ear a friendly flick and finished off the last couple of bites of squirrel. Until now, she had been so distracted by her troubles that she hadn't given any thought to what her life would be like as a warrior—such as having a mate. But now the possibility bloomed in her mind like a flower opening its petals to the sun.

I bet Goldenpaw would make a great father. . . .

But as quickly as the thought entered her mind, another answered it. *Stop it!* Morningkit hissed. *Stop trying to forget me!*

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Chapter Sixteen

When Tawnypelt had received permission from the other Clans to visit their elders, she found herself strangely reluctant. *What if I speak to all the elders and we're still no nearer to a solution?*

However, a couple of days before, she had been to see the RiverClan elder, Mosspelt, and now she was on her way to WindClan, to find out if the elders there, Whiskernose and Nightcloud, had any ideas to offer.

A brisk wind was blowing as Tawnypelt headed through ThunderClan territory. The tree branches were creaking and shedding what few leaves remained. Tawnypelt's fur was flattened to her sides, and dust swirled into her face, making her eyes water.

When she reached the stream that formed the border with WindClan, she found a sheltered spot under a bank of ferns and groomed her tousled fur while she waited for a WindClan patrol to arrive.

She had tidied herself up and was starting to get bored when she caught a fresher scent above the border markers and two WindClan toms appeared through the trees. Tawnypelt recognized Leaftail and Flutterfoot.

Springing to her paws, she waved her tail to attract their attention. "Hi! Over here!"

Leaftail, the wiry dark tabby who was in the lead, veered toward her, picking up the pace, and Flutterfoot bounded after him. They halted on the bank opposite Tawnypelt.

"Greetings, Tawnypelt." Leaftail dipped his head politely. "What can we do for you?"

“Give me permission to enter your territory,” Tawnypelt replied with an answering nod. “I need to speak to your elders.”

Leaftail and Flutterfoot exchanged a glance. “Oh, yes, all that stuff at the Gathering,” Flutterfoot meowed. He didn’t sound convinced that it was important.

“Harestar was okay with it, so I suppose you can.” Leaftail stepped back. “Come on over.”

The stream wasn’t at its widest here, but it was still a demanding leap from one bank to the other. Tawnypelt looked down at the churning brown water. *I really don’t want to fall into that.* She didn’t want to make a fool of herself in front of the WindClan toms, either. Flutterfoot was watching her, giving his brown-and-white pelt a couple of licks; Tawnypelt guessed he wouldn’t mind a bit if she got a wetting.

Outwardly confident, she took a few paces back, then ran up to the bank, pushed off with her powerful hind legs, and sailed across the stream to land neatly on all four paws next to Flutterfoot. “Let’s go, then,” she mewed.

“I’ll run ahead and warn Harestar,” Leaftail declared.

He took off, while Flutterfoot led the way through the narrow belt of trees and out onto the moor. Here the wind was blowing even harder from the hills, and to climb up to the WindClan camp the cats had to head straight into it. Tawnypelt hunched her shoulders and trudged upward, keeping her gaze fixed on the tough grass beneath her paws. It seemed a long time before she reached the boulders and gorse bushes that marked the edge of the WindClan camp.

Down at the bottom of the shallow scoop in the moorland that formed the camp, Harestar stood outside his den at the foot of the Tallrock. He was talking to Leaftail, but when he spotted Tawnypelt approaching, he started forward and met her at the foot of the slope.

“Greetings, Tawnypelt,” the WindClan leader meowed. “It’s good to see you. I suppose you’re here to talk to our elders?”

Tawnypelt bowed her head respectfully. “Yes, Harestar,” she replied, “if that’s still okay with you.”

“It is,” Harestar told her, “but first I would like to know a bit more about what you’re doing, and what you expect to accomplish. Come, sit here with me.”

He led her back to the Tallrock and sat on the side that was sheltered from the wind. Tawnypelt sat beside him.

“You know about my accident in the Twoleg den outside SkyClan territory,” she began, “and how I found myself in StarClan. Bluestar told me that a time of great peril is coming for the Clans, and that the elder trees see what fresh seedlings cannot. That tells me that the elders must somehow have a part to play in what is coming.”

“And what about the two-faced cat?” Harestar asked. “Do you have any idea who that might be?”

“From what Stoneteller told Crowfeather, it sounds as if it must be one of the questing cats,” Tawnypelt declared. “Fidgetflake and Shadowsight have a paw in each world, and so do Ivypool and Crowfeather himself.”

Harestar nodded understandingly. “And you hope that by talking to the elders you might find out who it is?”

“Yes, or some way to help the Clans out of their difficulties,” Tawnypelt told him.

“Do you mean the Twolegs at the Moonpool?”

“Yes. I don’t care what Tigerstar believes.” Tawnypelt realized that she was growing angry again, her tone defiant, and made herself speak calmly. “I’m not confident that we’ll ever get the Moonpool back.”

Harestar gazed at her, his eyes warm and sympathetic. “I noticed that you haven’t been living in ShadowClan recently,” he murmured thoughtfully. “Are you thinking about changing Clans?”

“I have too much on my mind to think about myself just now,” Tawnypelt responded. “Not until I do everything I can to follow Bluestar’s instructions in her prophecy. I believe all the Clans are in real danger of losing our connection to StarClan because we can’t use the Moonpool anymore.”

“I’m losing faith too,” Harestar admitted with a sigh. “Your project certainly can’t hurt. Let me take you to the elders.”

As she followed Harestar, Tawnypelt was relieved and a little surprised that she hadn’t seen any sign of Crowfeather. Ever since the previous Gathering, when he had accused Shadowsight of being the cat on the wrong path, she had been avoiding him. She simply didn’t know what to say. She was relieved to hear that he had recovered from the terrible fall he took during the quest to the Tribe of Rushing Water, but now she thought of the feelings she had for him and asked herself if she was being mouse-brained. Crowfeather must know how she felt about Shadowsight. She had even

taken him to the Tribe herself when he was a kit, hoping they could help with his seizures.

It was true that she felt a connection to Crowfeather, but nothing was more important to her than her kin. *Even the ones like Tigerstar, who can be mouse-brained at times.* She remembered how Harestar had asked her if she had considered changing Clans. *No, I can't imagine abandoning my kin.*

The WindClan elders had their den in an old badger set, the entrance sheltered by a gorse bush. They had obviously overheard Tawnypelt talking to Harestar, because Whiskernose was peering between the gorse branches, his eyes alight with curiosity, and Nightcloud stretched her neck to look over his shoulder.

"Come in," Whiskernose invited Tawnypelt. "We can go farther in if you like. I know ShadowClan cats don't care for the open air."

Tawnypelt glanced down the tunnel; she didn't like the look of the yawning dark gap, and thought she could still discern a faint, stale scent of badger. "No, thanks, I'm fine out here," she replied, finding a cozy spot near the trunk of the gorse bush.

Whiskernose and Nightcloud made themselves comfortable beside her.

"It's great to see a new face and have a talk," Whiskernose confessed. "It can be lonely, being an elder. And I became one so young. Without hunting and battling for the Clan, I don't feel I belong in the daily activities."

"The apprentices take good care of us, and the kits love to hear stories," Nightcloud pointed out.

"Yes, but I have lots of opinions, and I would like to share them," Whiskernose retorted.

"***L****ots* of opinions," Nightcloud agreed with a sigh. "Now you can hear them, too, Tawnypelt."

Tawnypelt hid her amusement. She hadn't known Whiskernose well when he was a warrior, but she remembered him being outspoken at Gatherings, and guessed that it ruffled his fur not to be at the center of Clan life.

"So tell me your opinion about leaving the Moonpool," Tawnypelt encouraged him. "Do you have any ideas about where the next one is, or where it should be?"

Whiskernose raised one hind leg and gave his ear a thoughtful scratch. "No idea at all," he responded. "I think we should be trying harder to get

behind those Twoleg barriers. If we don't look, we'll never know what they've done to the Moonpool."

Tawnypelt thought that the old tom could very well be right and tucked the idea away to consider later. "Do either of you remember seeing anything that might be helpful?" she asked. "Anywhere unusual, say, on the journey here from the old forest?"

Nightcloud shook her head. "Great StarClan, Tawnypelt, it was all *unusual*, right from when we set paw outside Clan territory. But I do remember a night with really bright stars that lit up the meadow where we were camped," she added more thoughtfully. "I'm just not sure where it was."

Tawnypelt didn't think that was helpful. Nights with bright stars could happen anywhere. "Do you know what the special places where we've connected to StarClan before might have in common . . . ?" she hazarded.

"They reflected the moon, of course." Nightcloud's curt tone suggested that Tawnypelt should have known that. "Perhaps we need to find another shiny place. What have the other elders told you?"

"The SkyClan elders have been dreaming of the gorge," Tawnypelt explained. "In RiverClan, Mosspelt spoke about dreaming many times about a dark mouth like a pike opening up in the riverbed. And Cloudtail of ThunderClan told me about having a dream that he was trapped in a dark place, with the scent of stagnant water nearby."

"That's very odd," Whiskernose mewed, and Nightcloud nodded agreement. "I'm not sure I have anything to help you," the WindClan tom continued. "The only dream I can remember is of lying on a warm, flat rock on the moor, listening to the breeze whistling through the grass."

"I don't remember dreaming much at all," Nightcloud added.

Tawnypelt couldn't see how Whiskernose's dream might help her, or whether she was any further forward on her quest. She thanked the elders, promised to visit again, and returned to find Harestar.

The WindClan leader was standing outside his den, deep in conversation with Crowfeather.

Mouse dung! Tawnypelt thought, then accepted that she couldn't go on avoiding the WindClan tom forever. *Maybe it is time we talked. . . .*

As she approached, Harestar turned toward her. "Tawnypelt! I hope the elders were able to help you."

“Maybe,” Tawnypelt replied. “They’ve given me something to think about, anyway.”

“Good,” Harestar purred. “And now Crowfeather can escort you to the ThunderClan border. That is where you’re staying, yes?”

“Yes, it is. Thank you, Harestar.”

Bidding the WindClan leader farewell with a respectful dip of her head, Tawnypelt followed Crowfeather out of the camp. To begin with, they walked in uncomfortable silence. Tawnypelt had no idea what to say, and she guessed Crowfeather was having the same problem.

About halfway to the border, Crowfeather halted on the bank of a small moorland stream. It was a pretty place, where stones fell away to form a tiny waterfall with a pool below, surrounded by reeds. Crowfeather sat by the water’s edge and gestured with his tail for Tawnypelt to sit beside him.

“Let’s sit for a moment,” he suggested. “I’m glad to see you, Tawnypelt,” he continued hesitantly when she had settled down. “But I can tell you’re feeling stern with me.”

“I am,” Tawnypelt replied. “Are you surprised?”

Crowfeather shook his head. “I suppose it’s because of what I said about Shadowsight.”

Tawnypelt was impressed that he knew her well enough to figure that out. “Yes,” she told him. “That’s what’s bothering me.”

“I’m sorry, Tawnypelt.” Crowfeather sounded as if that was really true. “What came out of my mouth isn’t what I meant. I was trying to explain that lots of cats *could* be the one Stoneteller warned us about. That’s my whole point. We don’t know enough yet to blame any cat.”

“Perhaps that’s so,” Tawnypelt agreed, her heart softening at his sincerity. “But you need to be more careful about what you say, Crowfeather. Some cats still suspect Shadowsight of bad intent because of what happened in the past: the way he listened to Ashfur’s voice and was responsible for Bramblestar losing a life and letting Ashfur’s spirit into his body.”

“That wasn’t his fault.” Crowfeather emphasized his words with a swish of his tail.

“It was not.” Tawnypelt spoke vehemently. “And remember, Shadowsight is the cat least likely to have a paw in both worlds now. He hasn’t had a connection to StarClan since he returned from the Dark Forest as one of the Lights in the Mist.”

“I know.” Crowfeather dipped his head, acknowledging that Tawnypelt was right. “I only have the highest regard for that young cat, especially after he did so much to battle Ashfur while that vile excuse for a cat was dominating the whole forest. He has the courage of a true warrior. I never *seriously* suspected that Shadowsight could ever take the wrong path.”

Tawnypelt’s chest relaxed with relief at Crowfeather’s sincere defense of Shadowsight. “It could be you,” she pointed out, “just as easily as Shadowsight.”

Crowfeather nodded. “It could.”

“And that leads me to another question,” Tawnypelt continued. “The same question that odd SkyClan apprentice asked. Why in the name of StarClan did you keep Stoneteller’s prophecy to yourself? It only makes cats suspect you.”

Crowfeather gave her a long look from intense blue eyes, then shook his head wearily. “Do you want to know the truth?” he asked.

“Of course I do!”

“I didn’t share it with any other cats because I wanted to share it with you first,” Crowfeather told her. “I didn’t know what to make of it, and I knew you would. You’re really much smarter than me.”

Tawnypelt was touched, and a little impressed by how Crowfeather had managed to wriggle out of a tight spot and avert suspicion. She wasn’t entirely sure that he was telling the truth. “I don’t know who to trust right now,” she sighed.

Crowfeather blinked, disappointed. “Isn’t there something here, between us?” he asked. “We’re more than old friends, aren’t we? Or am I imagining it?”

Completely taken aback, Tawnypelt didn’t know how to reply, and when she found the words, they came out more harshly than she had intended. “Perhaps there was a connection once,” she told him. “But it couldn’t work, even if I trusted you. We’re in different Clans, after all.”

“You don’t seem to have a Clan right now,” Crowfeather responded brusquely. “And the younger warriors have created rules that make it easier to change Clans—for love, or for any other reason.”

Tawnypelt glared at him, so offended that her shoulder fur started to bristle. “I still think of myself as ShadowClan,” she snapped, remembering how much she had given up, all the time she had missed with Brambleclaw,

to join a Clan where she would be respected. “I have no plans—*no plans at all*—to join WindClan.”

There was a depth of hurt in Crowfeather’s eyes. “I didn’t mean to upset you,” he mewed. “Everything is coming out wrong lately. I’m so sorry.” Hesitantly, he added, staring at the little waterfall where it gushed over the stones, “I think the world of you, that’s all.”

Every word struck straight into Tawnypelt’s heart. Part of her wanted to press herself against Crowfeather’s side and twine her tail with his. The other part wanted to flee for the border and never set paw on WindClan territory again.

She recognized that she was still shaken by the recent Gathering, and event was piling on event, too fast for her to cope. She was at odds with her Clan leader—who also happened to be her son—her brother had just died, and she was still grieving. And she had taken it on herself to discover the meaning of the prophecies.

“Perhaps there is a spark between us,” she told Crowfeather. “But just now . . . it’s too much. I think we should slow this down.”

Crowfeather raised his head, looking hopeful. “I see your point, but I was recently reminded how little time I might have left. If we have feelings for each other—and I know we do—I don’t want to put them off.”

Tawnypelt shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t right now.”

Crowfeather dipped his head, accepting her decision. Silently, awkwardly, they set out again for the border.

“I hope this won’t be the last talk we have,” Crowfeather meowed when they reached the border stream.

Tawnypelt merely nodded, leaped across the stream, and headed across ThunderClan territory to their camp. *I hope not, too,* she thought.

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Chapter Seventeen

“It’s time that the elders’ den was cleaned out,” Nectarsong meowed curtly. “You’d better get to work, Starlingpaw.”

Suppressing a sigh, Starlingpaw nodded. “Okay, Nectarsong,” he responded, then added, “I suppose I’m allowed to leave camp to find fresh bedding?”

Nectarsong narrowed her eyes. “Yes. But don’t push it.”

Quietly seething, Starlingpaw slid through the fern barrier and out into the forest. He was sick of being punished for his behavior at the Gathering, especially as Nectarsong had decided to back up Hawkwing instead of defending her apprentice.

And I’m sure she’s still on my side, Starlingpaw thought, beginning to claw moss from the roots of the nearest tree. *After all, she’s the cat who encouraged me to tell the truth.*

When he returned to camp, pushing a massive ball of moss and bracken in front of him, the three elders had already left their den and were sunning themselves on a flat rock nearby.

“Make sure there are no thorns in that!” Sparrowpelt called out as Starlingpaw trudged past.

“I will, Sparrowpelt,” Starlingpaw hissed through gritted teeth.

He spread out the new bedding beside the den entrance so it would have a chance to dry while he cleared out the stale nests. While he worked, he spotted Duskshine and Beesting padding across the camp toward him.

Starlingpaw braced himself for mockery over his punishment, but the young warriors' expressions were friendly as they halted in front of him.

"I think it's great, what you said at the Gathering," Beesting told him, clearly impressed. "It's not fair that you're being punished like this."

"Yeah, you really stood up to Hawkwing," Duskshine added. "You're not afraid of anything, are you?"

"Not of Hawkwing," Starlingpaw responded, with a swift glance around to make sure that the Clan deputy wasn't within earshot. "When you're telling the truth, what is there to be afraid of?"

Beesting sighed. "I wish I could be more like you, Starlingpaw," she confessed. "When I was an apprentice, sometimes I felt like Sunnypelt was just *wrong*, but I wasn't brave enough to say so."

Starlingpaw felt his chest swelling up with pride at what the young she-cat said. "Mentors want what's best for their apprentices," he declared. "It's important to learn everything you can. I always listen to Nectarsong, because I want to understand what she's trying to teach me. But a mentor can't control what's in your mind. Only you can do that."

Beesting was staring at him, eyes wide with admiration. "You're pretty smart for an apprentice," she mewed.

And you're pretty cute. Starlingpaw liked Beesting's beautifully groomed tabby-and-white fur, the white parts sparkling clean. *I'll think about that later, when I have my warrior name.*

As the thought went through his mind, he spotted Nectarsong bounding across the camp, waving her tail to attract his attention.

"Are you nearly finished with that?" she asked, angling her ears toward the bedding. "Leafstar has given me permission to take you on a hunting patrol."

Finally! Excitement thrilled through Starlingpaw. He had been stuck in camp for more than a quarter moon, and his paws itched to be out in the forest.

"I'll be done in a couple of heartbeats," he promised Nectarsong.

His mentor nodded approvingly. "I'll find some more warriors to go with us," she meowed. "Meet us outside the warriors' den."

Bidding a quick goodbye to Duskshine and Beesting, Starlingpaw plunged into the elders' den and bundled the stale bedding into one massive ball, which he shoved out of camp by the quickest route. Now that the den

floor was clear, he carried the fresh moss and bracken inside, checking rapidly for thorns as he arranged everything into three nests. He was out again within heartbeats, shaking scraps of debris from his pelt as he raced across the camp.

Duty calls. . . .

Nectarsong had chosen Palesky and Pigeonfoot to join the hunting patrol, and she led the way to a rocky slope dotted with tall trees not far from the ThunderClan border. They caught glimpses of small prey scuttering among the boulders, but they were hard to track down. There were too many holes and crevices where the prey could hide. Palesky had caught a mouse, and Nectarsong had a shrew, but every cat was growing tired and frustrated.

Starlingpaw halted, gazing up at the sky. Two magpies were circling overhead, a thrush skimmed by, and a pigeon took off from a nearby tree, its wings beating strongly as it headed off into thicker forest.

"If only . . . ," Starlingpaw murmured.

"Have you got bees in your brain, Starlingpaw?" Palesky came to stand beside him. "The birds are too high in the sky for us to hunt. Even from the tree branches, we wouldn't be able to catch one."

"I wasn't thinking of that," Starlingpaw made himself reply politely, even though he was annoyed by the black-and-white she-cat's condescending tone. "I was remembering how the Tribe hunted."

"Do you mean what I think you mean?" Nectarsong asked, padding over to join him with Pigeonfoot at her shoulder.

"The way they would use something shiny to attract a large bird like an eagle," Starlingpaw responded. "If the bird was curious enough, it would come down to have a look, and all the prey-hunters would jump in to make the kill."

"You mean that really worked?" Pigeonfoot sounded incredulous. "Cats were really able to catch an eagle?"

"It really did," Nectarsong confirmed.

"I thought we might try it to catch these smaller birds," Starlingpaw continued. "Look at that flat stone over there, jutting out over the slope. If we can find something shiny and put it at the end of the stone, it will flash when the sun catches it. Then we jump out and grab the bird."

He glanced around to see what his Clanmates thought of the idea. Palesky and Pigeonfoot both looked doubtful, but Nectarsong's eyes were shining with approval.

"Brilliant!" she purred. "Okay, every cat, scatter and look for something really shiny."

Palesky let out a grunt. "I guess it's got to be better than chasing prey that just dives down its hole. I'm sure that last mouse was snickering at me!"

It was Pigeonfoot who found the stone they were looking for: It had a flat edge that reflected the sunlight if it was placed at the right angle. Starlingpaw pushed the stone to the end of the jutting rock, making sure it cast a gleam upward where the birds could see it.

All four cats of the hunting patrol found places to hide within sight of the shiny stone. Starlingpaw flattened himself to the ground in a shallow scoop about five tail-lengths away. His gaze was fixed on the sky, alert for the approach of a bird.

As the moments slipped by, Starlingpaw began to worry that his ruse wouldn't work. He could make out Palesky under a bush not far away, beginning to get fidgety.

"Come on, StarClan," he muttered under his breath. "Send us a bird!"

As if his prayer was answered, a magpie began circling the stone, then alighted at the end of the jutting rock. Its head on one side, it hopped closer, stretching its neck forward to peck at the shiny surface.

Yes!

Paw step by paw step, Starlingpaw crept forward, his belly fur brushing the gritty surface of the ground. The magpie seemed unaware of him. Starlingpaw couldn't see what his Clanmates were doing; all his attention was concentrated on his prey.

Finally, Starlingpaw thought that he was close enough for a pounce. He gathered his legs underneath him in the hunter's crouch, then launched himself into the air. But as he took off, a stone shifted under one hind paw. Instead of landing on the magpie, he lurched sideways. The magpie took off with a squawk of alarm.

Starlingpaw landed on his side, his paws groping as he struggled to stand. But the soil and small stones beneath him shifted; he couldn't find anything to grip. He let out a screech as he began rolling down the slope; when he struck bigger rocks, he only bounced off, gathering speed as he went. At

last, he struck something with a thump that drove all the breath out of his body. Dazed, he looked up at a gnarled tree stump and realized it had broken his fall.

Moments later, Nectarsong skidded to a halt beside him. “Starlingpaw, are you okay?” she asked anxiously.

“Uh . . . ,” Starlingpaw tried to reply, but his mouth was full of grit. He staggered upright, but pain stabbed through him from one of his hind paws as he put his weight on it. He couldn’t stop himself from letting out a gasp.

“Your paw hurts?” Nectarsong narrowed her eyes as she examined the paw that Starlingpaw was holding off the ground. “You must have wrenched it.”

“It’ll be fine,” Starlingpaw insisted, spitting out the worst of the grit and shaking debris out of his pelt.

As well as the injured paw, all his body felt like one vast ache. He could feel blood trickling down his forehead and realized he must have scratched himself too.

But I have to be brave, he thought.

“We’ll get you back to camp,” Nectarsong declared as the other two cats padded up. “Pigeonfoot, come on Starlingpaw’s other side to help him. Palesky, go and collect our prey.”

“Such as it is,” Palesky sniffed.

“I’m sorry I missed the magpie,” Starlingpaw mewed as they set out, with him leaning on Nectarsong’s and Pigeonfoot’s shoulders.

“It happens to us all,” Nectarsong responded, giving his ear a comforting lick.

“And it was a good idea,” Pigeonfoot assured him. “We’ll try it again sometime.”

Back in the SkyClan medicine cats’ den, Fidgetflake examined Starlingpaw, patting him all over and sniffing at the scratch on his forehead before licking it clean. He gave special attention to the apprentice’s injured paw.

“You’ve wrenched the hock,” he announced at last. “You’re lucky it isn’t worse, given how far you fell and how hard the stump was. You’ll have to stay off that paw for a few days.”

Starlingpaw let out a groan. “I’d only just gotten permission to hunt again!”

“Well, you won’t be hunting for a while yet.” Fidgetflake’s tone was sympathetic. “Now keep that leg still while I bind it up.”

He fetched a stick and laid it along Starlingpaw’s injured ankle, binding it in place with a length of ivy tendril.

“You’d better have a poppy seed to help you rest,” Fidgetflake continued. He disappeared into the back of the den and returned with a single black seed laid on a leaf.

“Thanks, Fidgetflake,” Starlingpaw mewed as he lapped it up.

“You’re a brave cat,” Fidgetflake remarked, “but you should remember to think before you jump.” He paused, then added in a meaningful tone, “That advice applies to a lot of things.”

Too exhausted to think about that, Starlingpaw sighed with relief as he sank into a cozy nest in the medicine cats’ den. *I could sleep for a moon. . . .*

But before he fell asleep, Starlingpaw heard paw steps at the entrance to the den and looked up to see his mother, Needleclaw, and his sister, Robinpaw.

“Nectarsong told us you were hurt,” Needleclaw meowed. “How bad is it? Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Starlingpaw replied drowsily. “I’ve wrenched my hock, but Fidgetflake has fixed it. Look.” He angled his ears toward the stick.

“That looks weird!” Robinpaw exclaimed, giving it a curious sniff. “Will you have to wear it always?”

“No, only while it heals,” Starlingpaw told her.

“Nectarsong told us how it happened,” Needleclaw went on. “You were so clever and so brave! I’m really impressed, and I think Nectarsong is, too.”

“And me!” Robinpaw agreed.

“I haven’t told you yet,” Needleclaw continued, “but I admired the way you told the truth at the Gathering. You really didn’t deserve the punishment Hawkwing gave you. It took so much courage to stand up to Crowfeather; you reminded me of Kitescratch. He always believed in risking anything to protect SkyClan.”

Starlingpaw felt warmth spreading over him at the mention of his father. *I want to be just like him. . . .*

“I wouldn’t have dared speak up,” Robinpaw admitted, “but I’m so glad you did, Starlingpaw. Crowfeather or one of the other questers could be the cat we’ve been warned about.”

Needleclaw nodded agreement. “No cat wants some misguided warrior dragging the Clans down the wrong path again. We need to keep a lookout, especially with all the problems the Twolegs are causing.”

The last few words his mother spoke seemed to echo in Starlingpaw’s mind. The poppy seed was taking effect, and he was already drifting into unconsciousness.

“I wonder who it is?” Robinpaw meowed. “The cat in the prophecy, I mean.”

“Maybe . . . ,” Needleclaw began.

But before she could suggest a name, Starlingpaw had already sunk into the welcome darkness of sleep.

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Chapter Eighteen

“It’s coming, Moonpaw! Hurry!”

As Goldenpaw called out, Moonpaw was already poised in the hunter’s crouch. She was hidden under the low-spreading branches of a thornbush, and the fleeing rabbit had no idea she was there.

In the last heartbeat it spotted her, its eyes bulging with terror, and tried to veer away, but it was too late. Moonpaw lunged out of the bush and sank her forepaws into its shoulders. The rabbit went limp as she gave it the killing bite to its throat.

“Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” she meowed.

Goldenpaw bounded up to her, his eyes shining with pride. “We make a *brilliant* team!” he exclaimed.

“We do,” Moonpaw agreed; the thought warmed her pelt from ears to tail-tip. *Is Goldenpaw* flirting *with me?* It sounded like it, and if he was, Moonpaw certainly wasn’t going to object.

But why do you need him? Morningkit’s wail ripped through Moonpaw’s mind. *You have me. You’ve always had me.*

Even though her sister sounded sad, Moonpaw couldn’t bring herself to reply. *What was it Tree said?* she asked herself. *He wanted me to concentrate on my own life, and on building my own confidence.* Besides, Morningkit wasn’t enough for her. She wanted a real life, apart from her dead littermate.

I want a life with Goldenpaw.

“Let’s try the new hunting technique Sunbeam taught me,” Moonpaw suggested, wanting to impress Goldenpaw even more.

“How does that work?” Goldenpaw asked.

“As soon as we spot prey, one of us should hide,” Moonpaw explained. “Then the other one just lunges at the prey so that it’s distracted and has no idea that there’s another cat in hiding. Sunbeam says it works better with a group, to cover all the directions the prey might flee, but we can try it with two, if you like.”

“It sounds like a great idea,” Goldenpaw agreed.

The fresh smells of early morning sent energy flooding through Moonpaw, as side by side the two cats headed farther into the trees. Finally, they spotted a squirrel sitting on a tree stump, nibbling at something clutched in its forepaws.

“Okay, do you want to hide?” Moonpaw suggested.

With a brisk nod, Goldenpaw slipped into the middle of a clump of ferns; it was near the foot of a beech tree that might look like a refuge for the squirrel.

As soon as he was out of sight, Moonpaw hurled herself at the squirrel, letting out an earsplitting screech. The squirrel leaped off the tree stump and fled for the beech tree. Before it could start climbing, Goldenpaw erupted out of the ferns and pinned it to the ground with one forepaw, while with the other he slashed his claws across its throat. Its squeal of terror was abruptly cut off.

“Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” he meowed.

Moonpaw bounded up to him, full of joy that the new technique had worked so well. “Great catch!” she exclaimed.

“Great idea,” Goldenpaw responded, his eyes shining with triumph. “Should we try it again? You can hide this time.”

Using Sunbeam’s new technique, Moonpaw and Goldenpaw managed to catch another squirrel, and headed back to camp with their prey.

They padded side by side in companionable silence, their pelts brushing. Moonpaw felt a shiver thrill right through her every time Goldenpaw’s fur touched hers.

I don’t know what you see in him. Morningkit’s voice, sour and envious, broke into Moonpaw’s mind. *He’s just some big dumb furball. I know everything about you, Moonkit.*

Moonpaw couldn’t stop herself from correcting her sister. “It’s Moon*paw*,” she mumbled around the squirrels she was carrying.

Halting, Goldenpaw turned toward her and dropped his rabbit. “Is Morningkit talking to you?” he asked with a wry twist to his mouth.

Moonpaw’s pelt grew hot with embarrassment, and for a moment she didn’t know what to say. “Just a little,” she replied at last, dropping the squirrels. “It’s silly. No big deal.”

Real nice, Moonpaw was Morningkit’s response.

But her voice was growing weaker. Moonpaw had noticed that over the last few days, and it was even fainter now.

“I’m glad you told me about Morningkit,” Goldenpaw mewed. “I like that you trust me. And I like the way we’ve come to know each other better.” He hesitated, then went on with a rush, “I really like *you*, Moonpaw.”

Moonpaw’s heart soared like a skylark. “I really like you, too,” she purred.

For all her happiness, a small worm of uncertainty stirred in Moonpaw’s belly. She really hoped she could be Goldenpaw’s mate, but how could she possibly manage it with Morningkit in her head?

Then Moonpaw pushed her doubts away. Perhaps Morningkit would have moved on by then. Or perhaps, once Moonpaw had a life of her own to fill her thoughts, Morningkit would fade away.

I have to believe that I can make it work!

Back in camp, they headed with their prey toward the fresh-kill pile. Ivypool was watching as they deposited their prey.

“That’s a great catch,” she declared with a nod of approval. “You must have worked hard. The elders and kits have already eaten, so you can take something to eat for yourselves.”

“Thanks, Ivypool,” Moonpaw responded, pleased that they had impressed the Clan deputy.

She dragged the rabbit off the pile and carried it a couple of tail-lengths away. As she and Goldenpaw settled down to eat, Shinepaw came scampering over. “Wow, what a brilliant catch!” she exclaimed.

“You can share,” Goldenpaw told his sister. “There’s plenty.”

“Flipclaw took me on the border patrol this morning,” Shinepaw meowed after she had taken her first gulp of rabbit. “We met the ShadowClan patrol

setting their border markers. Would you believe Gullswoop tried to tell *me* how to set a marker? Like I haven't been setting them for moons?"

"No!" Moonpaw exclaimed. "That's terrible."

"What happened?" Goldenpaw asked.

"Flipclaw told her to mind her own business," Shinepaw replied. "And I —well, I think a bit of ThunderClan scent might have accidentally gotten onto Gullswoop."

Goldenpaw let out a snort of amusement. "Shinepaw, you are the worst!"

All three cats burst into *mrrow*s of laughter. Moonpaw felt the warmth of belonging with her fellow apprentices. There wasn't even a snide comment from Morningkit to spoil the moment.

Their laughter was dying away when Sunbeam came padding past, heading for Nightheart and Twigbranch, who were chatting beside the fresh-kill pile.

Moonpaw scrambled to her paws. "Do you need me, Sunbeam?" she asked her mentor.

Sunbeam shook her head. "Meet me at sunhigh," she mewed. "We'll do some battle training." She turned away, then looked back, giving Moonpaw an intense scrutiny. "You seem much happier now," she continued. "I guess that telling every cat about Morningkit has really changed you."

Moonpaw nodded in vigorous agreement. "It's true," she declared. "I feel lighter every day."

"Good," Sunbeam purred.

With a nod of farewell, she padded on. Moonpaw crouched down again, tucked in her paws, and took another bite of delicious rabbit.

Curling up in her nest that night, Moonpaw let her thoughts drift to the future. She could imagine herself and Goldenpaw, mates at last, chasing after three gorgeous kits. They would have their warrior names by then; Moonpaw hoped she would prove herself as a warrior. Maybe she would even be named deputy someday.

Me and Goldenpaw, she thought happily. *Two of the strongest and wisest cats in ThunderClan.*

These bright images followed Moonpaw into sleep. She was walking in a forest, Goldenpaw at her side, the sky unbroken blue, the sun streaming

through the trees and casting dappled light on the ground.

“Is Morningkit giving you any more trouble?” Goldenpaw asked.

“No, I hardly hear her now,” Moonpaw replied. “And when she does speak to me, she’s only being silly.”

As the words left her mouth, a shadow fell across the forest. The sun had gone. Moonpaw looked up to see that roiling storm clouds had replaced the blue. Every hair on Moonpaw’s pelt prickled with the beginning of fear.

“What’s happening?” Her voice quivered as she turned to Goldenpaw.

Without warning, an orange cat leaped out of the darkness among the trees and hurled herself on Goldenpaw, carrying him off his paws and pinning him to the ground.

“Morningkit!” Moonpaw yowled. “No!”

Shock jolted through her as she saw that Morningkit was there in bodily form, her claws tearing through Goldenpaw’s shining pelt, dragging blood after them.

“Stop it!” Goldenpaw screeched. He flailed his paws at Morningkit, but didn’t seem able to do any damage. “Get off me!”

Moonpaw lunged at her sister, trying to pull her off Goldenpaw and stop the vicious attack. But she couldn’t grab hold of Morningkit. Whenever Moonpaw landed on top of her, Morningkit seemed to fade into nothingness, only to reappear behind her a heartbeat later.

Goldenpaw was looking worse and worse. His blood was flowing out, clotting in the dry leaves on the forest floor. His attempts to fight grew feebler and feebler. “Moonpaw!” he begged, his voice choking. “Make her stop!”

Moonpaw let out a scream of terror and frustration, and at that moment her eyes flicked open, and she realized she was still in her own den.

“Stop it!” Goldenpaw’s voice came from above her. “I said stop it! Wake up!”

Moonpaw focused her eyes; what she saw sent shivers of horror through her pelt. Goldenpaw was stooping over her, trying to pin her down. Blood oozed from scratches through his fur: not as bad as his wounds in Moonpaw’s dream, but not far off.

Behind Goldenpaw, Shinepaw was staring with fear in her eyes. “You attacked him.” Her voice was shaking so that she could hardly form the words. “While he was sleeping. Defenseless. And we couldn’t wake you and make you stop.”

Moonpaw let herself go limp, so shocked that she couldn't speak. *How could I do that to Goldenpaw?*

"It's okay," Goldenpaw meowed. "You didn't mean to."

He's right. I *didn't mean to,* Moonpaw realized. *But Morningkit did.*

And while Moonpaw was sleeping, Morningkit had managed to make her unsheathe her claws and attack the cat she wanted to be her mate.

"I'm sorry!" she choked out at last. "I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay," Goldenpaw repeated, stretching out his neck to give Moonpaw's ear a reassuring lick. "I'll clean myself up, and in the morning I'll get some marigold from the medicine cats. I'll be fine."

But what if you weren't? Moonpaw asked herself, still unable to shake off her feelings of utter horror. Questions that she couldn't answer pounded into her mind.

If Morningkit could make Moonpaw attack Goldenpaw in the apprentices' den, what would she be able to do throughout the life that Moonpaw would share with him? She hoped that Morningkit would give up and move on, but she had no way of knowing whether that would happen. And if it didn't, Morningkit might always be able to control her while she slept. Would she ever give up? Would Goldenpaw ever be truly safe?

"You should go back to sleep," Goldenpaw mewed gently. "Shinepaw and I will take turns watching over you."

Moonpaw felt overwhelmed by his kindness. She had hurt him, even if that was the last thing she wanted, and he hadn't spoken a single word of blame. Full of love for him, she couldn't find the words she wanted to say, but she stroked her tail along his flank, hoping that the look in her eyes would tell him everything for her.

Then she settled down in her nest again and closed her eyes. But sleep refused to come. Her future stretched out before her, a pathway as dark as any in the Place of No Stars.

Tree had made Moonpaw believe that she could live a normal life. But Tree was wrong. She knew that she was *not* normal, however much she might long to be.

As long as she stayed in ThunderClan, she would be a danger to every cat.

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Chapter Nineteen

Something was tickling Tawnypelt's nose. Forcing her eyes open, she realized that a fern frond from her bedding was pushed up against her face; she batted sleepily at it.

Since the time when Squirrelstar had insisted on Moonpaw's telling the truth to an assembly of the Clan, Tawnypelt had felt uncomfortable sleeping in the apprentices' den. Instead, the elders had invited her to stay with them. They had welcomed her warmly; it was easy for Tawnypelt to feel that she belonged with them, at least for a while.

Raising her head, shaking off the last shreds of sleep, Tawnypelt looked around the den. No other cat was there, and she realized from the strength of the light filtering through the branches of the hazel bush that dawn was long past.

I didn't mean to sleep so late!

Instinctively Tawnypelt bunched her muscles to spring out of her nest and get on with her duties. Then she remembered that she had no fixed duties in this camp. Stretching her jaws in a massive yawn, she settled back into her nest to have a good think.

Grief for Brambleclaw was still embedded in her like a nut inside its shell. She still half expected to see him grooming himself on the Highledge outside his den or emerging from the thorn tunnel loaded with prey. He was always in her thoughts, however hard she tried to concentrate on what she needed to do.

Besides that, she was depressed and frustrated by her failure to make any sense out of Bluestar's prophecy. Talking to the elders of almost every Clan

seemed to have done no good at all. Tawnypelt wanted to find some common idea, something that would tie together everything they had told her. Something that would lead her onward and help her discover what StarClan needed her to know.

But I just can't!

However often Tawnypelt turned things over in her mind, she still wasn't sure what Bluestar had wanted her to see. What was it that she and the other older cats could understand that the fresh seedlings couldn't?

Nothing, as far as I can tell. Tawnypelt sighed and stretched. *Oh, StarClan, why can't you stop talking in riddles, just this once!*

Sitting up, she groomed the bits of moss and bracken out of her fur, then rose and slipped out through the hazel branches into the camp. At once she spotted Brackenfur and Thornclaw stretched out lazily on a nearby rock and enjoying the pale leaf-bare sunlight.

Tawnypelt padded toward them, but she had only gone a few steps when she heard her name being called. Turning, she saw Squirrelstar standing on the Highledge, her dark ginger fur shining in the sun.

"Come up!" the Clan leader called, waving her bushy tail. "I want a word."

Immediately Tawnypelt headed for the tumbled rocks and ran lightly up to join Squirrelstar. "What can I do for you?" she asked, curious to know what was on Squirrelstar's mind.

"Come inside," Squirrelstar responded, leading the way into the den. "Then we can talk in private."

Inside, she settled on the edge of her nest, and gestured Tawnypelt to sit nearby. "I know you're still grieving for Brambleclaw," she began, her green gaze somber. "I'm grieving, too. How are you managing to cope?"

"I'm not sure I am," Tawnypelt admitted. "I still can't believe he's gone. And I can't stop thinking about all the seasons we were apart because I followed our father into ShadowClan. I feel so guilty."

Squirrelstar nodded. "I understand," she mewed. "I have regrets, too. Especially that I didn't trust him to help me with Leafpool's kits. He didn't stop loving them when he found out that he wasn't their real father, but for a while he stopped loving me. Or maybe he didn't want to love me." Briefly she closed her eyes tight, then opened them and added, "If you had stayed, you would still have reasons to feel guilty. Because that's the way it is. No cat is perfect."

Tawnypelt bowed her head in silence. *When did that annoying, headstrong young cat become so wise?* The gripping claws of her grief eased a very little. It was good to talk about Brambleclaw with a cat who loved him so much.

After a few moments, Squirrelstar looked up and gave her pelt a shake. "I need to ask you what your plans are," she told Tawnypelt.

Her voice was gentle, friendly; Tawnypelt didn't feel that the Clan leader's words were a hint that she ought to leave.

"You've been a welcome guest in ThunderClan," Squirrelstar continued, "especially as you were such a comfort to Brambleclaw when he was ill. But you can't stay here as a guest forever. You're a great hunter, a strong warrior, and you would be an asset to any Clan. Do you want to go through the three trials and become a ThunderClan cat? We would be delighted to have you."

Tawnypelt stared at her, completely taken aback. She had enjoyed her time visiting in ThunderClan; it was interesting to revisit the Clan of her kithood. And the time she had spent with her brother had been very precious. But she also had to remind herself that leaving ThunderClan, leaving her littermate, was what was *meant* to happen.

Or am I trying to convince myself of that?

When all was said and done, Tawnypelt told herself, she felt in her heart that she *was* a ShadowClan cat, loyal to the bone.

But is that really true?

A hollow space opened up inside Tawnypelt when she asked herself that question. She believed that she belonged in ShadowClan, but she didn't know whether she would be welcome there now. She couldn't imagine that Tigerstar would really refuse to let her return, but if he was to welcome her, Tawnypelt knew that she would have to forget her pride and apologize.

Do I want to do that?

Whatever Tigerstar might say, however much he refused to believe in her vision, Tawnypelt would insist on following the wishes of StarClan.

Deep in thought, it took a moment for Tawnypelt to realize that Squirrelstar was watching her closely.

"I'll talk to Tigerstar for you," she began, as if she had been aware of all that had been passing through Tawnypelt's mind. "That is, if you want to go back to ShadowClan."

Tawnypelt's mouth twisted wryly. *I can imagine how well* that *would go!*

Tigerstar had always been too proud to tolerate interference from the other Clans. It would be better for Tawnypelt to talk to him herself, but her belly lurched at the idea. She loved her son, but dealing with him right now was the last thing she wanted. Now that she couldn't make sense of anything the elders had told her, he would be more dismissive of her plans and her vision than ever. Besides, he hadn't tried to reach out to her at all.

Maybe he really doesn't want me to come back.

Tawnypelt's first instinct had been to say no to Squirrelstar's offer of a place in ThunderClan. Now she wondered what it would be like if she said yes.

"Thank you, Squirrelstar," she murmured. "May I have some time to think it over?"

"Of course," Squirrelstar responded. "But don't take too long."

Tawnypelt dug her teeth into a plump magpie, tearing off a bite. The clear, sunny weather of the last few days had given way to heavy rain, and though the rain had stopped in the early morning, there was a damp chill in the air. But it still felt good to be crouching here beside the fresh-kill pile, sharing prey and gossip with the ThunderClan cats. She got along well with them; she already felt that some of them, like Twigbranch and Mousewhisker, were becoming good friends.

But can I really see them as Clanmates?

Even though she was worried about how things stood between her and Tigerstar, she wasn't sure if she could really consider switching Clans, as Squirrelstar had suggested the day before. It would be such a massive paw step, and once she had taken it, there could be no going back.

Sound at the entrance to the thorn tunnel distracted Tawnypelt from her thoughts. Looking up, she saw Shellfur pad into the camp, closely followed by a pale gray she-cat. Tawnypelt sat up, still gripping the magpie in her jaws, a ripple of surprise running through her as she recognized the newcomer.

"Dovewing!" Ivypool called out her sister's name, bounding across the camp to greet her. Within moments Lionblaze and Birchfall and more of the

ThunderClan cats crowded around her, their voices raised in eager welcome.

Letting the magpie fall, Tawnypelt turned away, gazing down at her paws and her half-eaten prey. Of course Dovewing would want to visit her kin and friends in ThunderClan; she had been a ThunderClan cat far more recently than Tawnypelt herself, and her littermate, Ivypool, was Clan deputy. Tawnypelt didn't want to assume that her Clanmate had come to see her.

But before long, Dovewing's scent wreathed around her; Tawnypelt heard approaching paw steps and her Clanmate's voice. "Greetings, Tawnypelt."

Half reluctantly, Tawnypelt rose to her paws. Her relationship with Dovewing hadn't been easy ever since Tawnypelt had supported Birchfeather's decision to join SkyClan. "Greetings, Dovewing," she mewed cautiously.

But Dovewing's next words surprised Tawnypelt and drove away her misgivings.

"Tawnypelt, I'm so sorry that I blamed you for encouraging Birchfeather to follow his heart," she declared. "Tigerstar and I were so upset that we were unfair to you. We both realize now that it was Birchfeather's decision. He's not our kit anymore; he's grown up, and he was going to do what he thought was right. His heart is in SkyClan with Ridgeglow." She paused, then added with pleading in her gaze, "Can you ever forgive us for being so angry with you?"

"Of course I forgive you," Tawnypelt purred. "I understand how hard it is to let your kits go."

Dovewing brightened, relief in her eyes and her voice as she continued. "That's true. But I know that you will always be there for Tigerstar, just as I plan to be there always for my own kits to turn to."

"I know." *But where is she going with this?* Tawnypelt wondered.

"Tigerstar misses you, Tawnypelt," Dovewing continued. "He'd never admit it to me—or to any cat—but he's been moping around camp for days now. He talks about you a lot, too."

"I miss him—of course I do," Tawnypelt responded. "And I'm glad that you can accept Birchfeather's decision."

She could tell that Dovewing was hoping that her news would encourage Tawnypelt to ask Tigerstar if she could return to ShadowClan. But

Tawnypelt couldn’t make herself do it. If Tigerstar was missing her, then maybe he should be the one to offer the invitation.

“When I visited SkyClan, I was so impressed by Birchfeather,” she went on, deliberately changing the subject. “He’s fitting in so well. Both of us know, Dovewing, how difficult it can be to adapt to a new Clan.”

Dovewing’s tail curled up in amusement. “The new territory *alone* takes a lot of getting used to. When I first moved to ShadowClan, nothing seemed right, somehow. Since I was a kit, I’d been used to leafy branches above my head and the scents of dry earth and bracken. I thought I would never get used to ShadowClan’s pine trees and boggy ground. Cleaning my paws was so difficult!”

“I can understand that,” Tawnypelt told her as memories flickered through her mind like minnows in a stream. “Of course, we lived in the old forest when I changed Clans, but ThunderClan and ShadowClan territory were different enough that I felt the same way.”

“Just imagine what it would be like to live on WindClan’s grassy moorland,” Dovewing meowed.

“Or spend our time fishing like RiverClan cats,” Tawnypelt agreed.

Dovewing let out a *mrrow* of laughter. “I can’t imagine what it would have been like to grow up in that strange gorge where SkyClan used to live before they came here to the lake,” she declared. “But Birchfeather seems right at home among the rocks in SkyClan, and we both learned to love ShadowClan’s boggy pine woods. Certainly,” she continued, “it’s possible for a cat to grow to be a true part of their new Clan. But . . .”

Tawnypelt’s mind slipped away, Dovewing’s voice fading. Every hair on her pelt rose with excitement; Dovewing’s talk of different Clans had given her a whole new idea.

Of course each Clan would interpret a message from StarClan differently, she realized. SkyClan would dream of the gorge. WindClan would imagine whispering to be the wind through the grass. RiverClan might see a dark opening as a fish’s mouth. But couldn’t each Clan be dreaming of the same thing? All their dreams hinted at a dark place where noises whispered and the scent of water was nearby. Tawnypelt tried to think of somewhere like that around the lake, until she realized with sudden understanding that it wasn’t near the lake at all. Couldn’t all the elders’ visions be the Whispering Cave in the gorge, where seasons ago the medicine cat Echosong had

listened to the voices of SkyClan’s ancestors? Maybe that was where StarClan wanted them to go, back to SkyClan’s old home.

Tawnypelt was well aware that the gorge couldn’t support all five Clans. But perhaps if they could make contact with StarClan there, the starry spirits could guide them as to what they should do next.

“Thank you for coming.” Tawnypelt dragged herself back to the present and the kindness of her son’s mate, who had taken the trouble to visit her. “I’ll think about what you said, and I still honor ShadowClan. I’m still a ShadowClan warrior, and I think I always will be. But the truth is, I won’t be coming back to ShadowClan’s camp, not for a while.”

Dovewing’s eyes widened in surprise. “Why ever not?”

“I have a quest to organize,” Tawnypelt explained.

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Chapter Twenty

After choosing a mouse from the fresh-kill pile, Starlingpaw padded over to where the young warriors Duskshine and Beesting had already settled down to eat their share of prey. As he sat beside them, he noticed that they were both picking halfheartedly at the squirrel they were sharing.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"You mean you haven't heard?" Duskshine sounded astonished. "I thought the whole Clan knew."

"No—I don't know." Starlingpaw was beginning to feel impatient. "What are you meowing about?"

"The noises outside the camp," Beesting replied with a shudder. "Weird scratching and snuffling. They kept me awake all night."

That might explain why I haven't heard, Starlingpaw thought. *Nothing much wakes me when I'm in my nest.*

"What do you think it might be?" he asked.

Duskshine shrugged. "No cat knows."

"Macgyver said that he'd been hearing strange noises for days," Beesting continued. "But when the camp night guards went to look, they couldn't find anything. And the rain has washed away the scent."

As he listened to the young she-cat's story, Starlingpaw felt his chest begin to tighten with dread and foreboding. Could the cat whose paws were turning down the wrong path be stalking SkyClan in the middle of the

night, preparing to launch an attack? Starlingpaw found it easy to imagine that they would like to silence him and his whole Clan.

Leafstar's voice broke in on his thoughts as she leaped onto the Tallstump. "Let every cat old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Tallstump for a Clan meeting!"

Hawkwing was already standing at the foot of the stump. Harrybrook, Macgyver, and Tinycloud appeared from the warriors' den, followed by many more; they were quickly joined by Fallowfern and the other elders. Frecklewish and Fidgetflake emerged from their den and sat side by side a short distance away. Starlingpaw abandoned his prey and padded up to the gathering crowd, with Beesting and Duskshine hard on his paws.

"I've called this meeting to discuss the noises that have been disturbing the camp at night," Leafstar announced. "Hawkwing, report," she added with a nod to her deputy.

"The night guards have searched and found nothing," Hawkwing informed the Clan, repeating the story Beesting had told Starlingpaw. "At dawn this morning I led a patrol to search all around the outside of the camp. We found a few crushed plants, but nothing more, and the rain has destroyed any possible scent traces."

Anxious murmuring broke out among the Clan. Cats turned to each other, their eyes wide, their fur bushing up with anxiety.

"What are we going to do about it?" Sagenose asked worriedly.

"What can we do?" Rabbitleap responded. "We can't fight an enemy we can't see—or even smell."

"Do you think it might be a fox?" Plumwillow blinked up at her Clan leader. "Remember, we had one on our territory a few moons ago. Or maybe the badgers are back?"

Starlingpaw was aware of a sudden lightening of the tension at the dark gray she-cat's words. A fox or badger, dangerous though it might be, was far less terrifying than a threat no cat could explain.

"Good idea," Dewspring meowed. "But I certainly hope those badgers left for good."

"Yes, of course it must be a fox!" Cherrytail exclaimed, relief in her voice.

"I agree," Rootspring added.

They all sounded satisfied that they had solved the mystery. But Starlingpaw couldn't bear to have the problem dismissed so easily, when he was convinced that the Clan leader and her senior warriors were wrong. He leaped to his paws.

"I *don't* agree," he declared, meeting their gaze boldly. "We can't rule out the deceiver StarClan warned us about."

"Starlingpaw . . ." Nectarsong began moving toward him, a rebuke in her voice.

Starlingpaw ignored her. "Why would a fox appear now, and come so close to the camp several times without trying to invade? How could it manage to avoid the night guards? No—we know we have an enemy—the cat whose paws might turn onto the wrong path. Doesn't it make sense that it would be this new, hidden threat?"

Beesting and Duskshine raised their voices in yowls of agreement, but Starlingpaw saw nothing but looks of disapproval from the older cats.

"You're jumping at shadows," Hawkwing growled. "Why would a cat that might trouble the Clans roam around our camp like this?"

"Yes, what good would it do?" Mintfur demanded.

"And why would the deceiver target SkyClan?" Frecklewish added. "There was nothing in Stoneteller's warning to suggest that we're the only Clan in trouble."

"It might start with SkyClan," Starlingpaw retorted. "Or maybe it's targeting us because I spoke out."

Hawkwing rolled his eyes. "Getting above yourself there, aren't you?" he snapped.

Under his Clanmates' brusque dismissal of his ideas, Starlingpaw said no more, clamping his jaws on his smoldering anger. But his pelt still prickled rebelliously.

I know *I'm right,* he told himself. *They're being blind as moles, the whole bunch of them.*

"No cat has mentioned rogues," Leafstar meowed, letting her gaze travel around the assembled Clan. "A group of them might be invading our territory."

Hawkwing dipped his head politely. "Possible," he admitted, "though none of our patrols have reported traces of strange cats crossing our border. I believe Plumwillow is right, and it's a fox. I'll send out night patrols of

strong warriors to search, and I suggest that cats who are not on patrol be forbidden from leaving the camp at night until we know what we're dealing with—except for going to the dirtplace."

"Excellent suggestions, Hawkwing," Leafstar agreed. "And during the day every cat should be cautious, and keep an eye and nose out."

"And report any signs of a fox to me immediately," Hawkwing finished.

Starlingpaw's pads itched with annoyance as the meeting drew to an end. Hawkwing, he felt, was too quick to dismiss his opinion and Leafstar's. And anything could happen while the patrols were out looking for a fox that didn't exist.

"Duskshine, Beesting, come here," he mewed, beckoning with a wave of his tail. "You, too, Robinpaw," he added, intercepting his sister as she padded past. "We need to talk."

He led his Clanmates toward a quiet spot at the edge of the camp, gathering Ridgeglow and the new SkyClan warrior Birchfeather to join them. When they were crouched together, half hidden by ferns, he began to speak.

"Hawkwing is ignoring Leafstar's wisdom," he declared, "and I for one don't believe that those noises were made by a fox. It's much more likely to be rogues, sniffing around for what they can get."

"You said you thought it was the deceiver that Stoneteller told Crowfeather about," Ridgeglow pointed out. "Have you changed your mind?"

"No, I haven't," Starlingpaw replied. "I still think the noises are likely to be that cat, looking for ways to harm SkyClan. But no cat can deny that it *could* be rogues—except Hawkwing," he finished dismissively.

"So why did you want to talk to us?" Duskshine asked, raking his claws impatiently on the ground. "Why are we sitting here when we have duties to do?"

"Because this is more important than everyday duties," Starlingpaw replied. "If Hawkwing won't investigate properly, then *we* have to take matters into our own paws."

"Have you got bees in your brain?" Robinpaw asked, sitting upright and glaring at her brother. "If we disobey Hawkwing, we'll get into the most awful trouble."

"Keep your fur on," Starlingpaw retorted. "We won't get into trouble, because no cat will know about it—unless we catch the intruder, of course,

and then they'll be too pleased with us to punish us."

Beesting was looking doubtful, as if she agreed with Robinpaw. "So what's your plan?" she asked.

"I think we should form a secret group," Starlingpaw responded, trying to push down his excitement and sound calm and reasonable. "We'll make sure that there's no deceiver up to something around the camp at night. Hawkwing's patrols will be looking for a fox, so we will have to be alert for any other kind of trouble."

"So how do we do that?" Duskshine asked; Starlingpaw was pleased that he sounded interested. "If we patrol around the camp, we'll leave our scent behind and we'll be caught for sure."

Starlingpaw hesitated. He hadn't thought of that.

"We climb trees!" Ridgeglow suggested. "That way we can see all around, and the scents of the trees will hide ours."

"Good idea." Starlingpaw gave the young she-cat a nod of approval, even while he was annoyed that she had thought of it first. "We'll choose positions spread out around the outside of the camp, and we'll keep watch and wait to see what happens."

"We'll have to be sure Hawkwing's patrols don't catch us," Birchfeather pointed out. He had been silent up to now, his expression troubled; Starlingpaw guessed that he was only here because of Ridgeglow. "Hawkwing has forbidden cats to leave the camp unless they're on a night patrol," he added.

"That's true . . . ," Starlingpaw mewed. "So if any of us is on one of Hawkwing's patrols, they should guide the others away from the trees we're using." He paused for a moment, letting his gaze travel around the group of cats. "Are we all agreed, then?" he asked.

Robinpaw raised her tail. "*I'm* not," she declared. "I'm not going to sit all night in a stupid tree. If I got caught, Gravelnose would put me on tick duty for a moon. But I won't give you away," she added. "And I'll do my best to cover for you if you're missed in camp."

Starlingpaw tried to hide his annoyance. Robinpaw was his sister; she *ought* to support him. But he had to accept what she had offered; if they had a serious quarrel, that would put the whole plan at risk.

“That’s okay,” he meowed gruffly. “As for the rest of us—we’ll start tonight. I’m sure we’ll catch this intruder, whoever they are!”

Starlingpaw sat outside the apprentices’ den, pretending to groom himself while he watched Hawkwing assembling cats into two patrols. He let out a soft purr of satisfaction when he saw that Duskshine was chosen for one of them. The two cats exchanged a meaningful glance as the patrol padded out of the camp; Starlingpaw was sure that Duskshine would do his best to steer the other cats away from the trees where he and his followers were secretly watching.

Once the patrols were gone, Starlingpaw waited for the Clan to settle down for the night. His paws were itching to carry him out of camp and up the tree he had chosen; his belly roiled with frustration as some warriors decided to linger in the open while the last streaks of sunlight faded from the sky.

Finally, the camp cleared and sleepy meows from the dens sank into silence, Starlingpaw peered into his den to see Robinpaw already in her nest. “Remember what you promised,” he hissed. “Cover for me if any cat comes looking for me.”

“Sure,” Robinpaw mewed through a yawn. “I think you’re bee-brained, but I’ll do it.”

Reassured, Starlingpaw headed for the dirtplace, thankful that Violetshine and Quailfeather, who were guarding the camp entrance, had their backs to him. As he slipped through the ferns, he almost collided with Palesky, on her way back to camp. Whipping aside at the last moment, he stood, hardly daring to breathe until she was gone.

I don’t think she noticed me, he thought.

If she had, he would have had to pretend that he was only there to make dirt, and he’d probably have to give up his plan for that night. Worry gripped him like claws in his belly; he would be in so much trouble if he was discovered. But he convinced himself that it would be worth it, especially when he remembered what Needleclaw had said: Kitescratch would have risked anything to protect his Clan.

Starlingpaw raced up the tree he had chosen earlier, one that would give him a good view of the edge of camp, and stretched out on a branch. There were still enough leaves to give him some cover; peering through them, he

could see the fern barrier that enclosed the camp and a wide expanse of ground on either side.

I'll get a good view if the intruder comes here.

At first Starlingpaw was alert, aware of the tiniest movement of prey or windblown grass. But gradually, when nothing appeared, his mind drifted away. He felt his fur puffing up with pride as he remembered how he had rallied the younger cats to protect their Clan.

I'm going to be such a great warrior!

Even before he received his warrior name, he would prove Hawkwing wrong, and Leafstar would realize that her deputy wasn't ready to be Clan leader. If she decided to stay as leader for a little longer, maybe one day, when he was more experienced and had trained a great apprentice of his own, she would make him deputy, and then he would become SkyClan's leader.

Starlingpaw was deep into imagining himself leading his Clan into battle against a dangerous enemy when he heard a rustling right behind him. Startled, he whipped around and sprang, almost losing his balance in the tree. With fearful enemies still in his mind, he lashed out with claws and teeth before he realized what he was attacking. There was a reek of hot blood in his throat.

I'm saving the Clan!

His claws were ripping the creature apart when he noticed gray fur, a bushy tail hanging limp now: a squirrel, a harmless piece of prey that hadn't deserved such a brutal death.

"Thank you, StarClan for this prey," he muttered, half ashamed of himself.

He began to clean the blood spatters from his fur, glad that none of his Clanmates had witnessed the vicious assault.

Still, he told himself, *better safe than sorry. There's an enemy out there, even if this wasn't it.*

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Chapter Twenty-One

Moonpaw was padding beside the lake under a sky the rich blue of greenleaf dotted with little puffs of cloud. The air was full of the scent of lush vegetation. Moonpaw loved the warmth of sun on her fur and the dazzle of sunlight on the lake.

Soon she realized that another cat was padding alongside her. She turned her head, and gasped with astonishment when she recognized Brambleclaw. But this wasn't the sick elder she remembered from when he was dying. This cat was young and healthy, with glossy tabby fur and shining amber eyes. A warrior in his prime, as Moonpaw had never known him.

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" she mewed.

Brambleclaw dipped his head in assent, and now Moonpaw spotted the glitter of stars at his paws and ears. She drew in a breath of sheer wonder.

I thought only medicine cats, and maybe leaders, could have visions of the cats of StarClan!

"Moonpaw, I'm so sorry," Brambleclaw began, his eyes full of concern as he bent his head toward her. "I tried to bring Morningkit with me, but I couldn't make her travel to StarClan. She's too determined."

"Please don't apologize to me," Moonpaw responded, drinking in the sight of this splendid cat. "I know you tried your best."

As she was speaking, she realized that Brambleclaw was fading; she could see the expanse of the lake through his pelt.

"Oh, don't leave me!" she begged.

“I must.” Brambleclaw’s voice was fading too. “Take care, Moonpaw. Danger is coming.”

Moonpaw caught only a last gleam of amber eyes, and then he was gone.

High-pitched squealing sounded behind her. Startled, Moonpaw woke to see Myrtlebloom’s kits play fighting a few tail-lengths away. She felt stiff and uncomfortable, and realized that she had dozed off while she was patching a hole in the wall of the warriors’ den, a bramble tendril still in her paws.

Sick anxiety surged in her belly, and dread wreathed around her like a black cloud. It seemed that Brambleclaw had visited her in a dream to tell her that she—or Morningkit, who was part of her—was the danger that he spoke of.

Am I a threat to the Clans because of my littermate?

Moonpaw turned and glanced around the camp to see if any of her Clanmates had noticed how distracted she was from her task. Not far away, she spotted Goldenpaw, who was busy grooming himself. His fur had almost closed over the scratches she had given him in her night attack, but the memory wouldn’t fade so easily.

Glancing away before Goldenpaw could look up, before his gaze could meet hers, Moonpaw felt shame and horror tingling through her pelt. She would never have believed that she could hurt any Clanmate, much less the cat she hoped would be her future mate. But it had happened.

And what if he and Shinepaw hadn’t stopped me? A shudder passed through Moonpaw. *Would I have . . .*

Moonpaw pushed the thought away, just as she had been pushing Goldenpaw away since the attack, for his own good. One day, she hoped, she would be free of Morningkit, able to trust herself. When that happened, she thought—not for the first time—she might allow herself to get close to Goldenpaw again.

When she had finished patching the hole, Moonpaw helped Shinepaw change the bedding in the elders’ den, thankful that Finleap had called Goldenpaw to go hunting. She was afraid that Shinepaw would want to talk about the attack, but her fellow apprentice only talked about their task. Moonpaw was grateful for her kindness.

They were just arranging the new nests when Moonpaw heard Sunbeam calling to her from the entrance to the den. “Have you finished there, Moonpaw? I want you to come with me on a hunting patrol.”

“You go,” Shinepaw meowed at once. “I can finish up here.”

“Thanks, Shinepaw.”

When Moonpaw left the den, she saw Sunbeam waiting for her nearby with Nightheart and Stormcloud.

“Okay,” Sunbeam began as Moonpaw joined them. “I thought we could try along the border stream. I don’t think any cat has hunted there for a day or two.”

“Good idea,” Nightheart agreed. “Let’s go.”

I hope Goldenpaw’s patrol didn’t go that way, Moonpaw thought as she followed the others out of the thorn tunnel.

As Sunbeam led her patrol through the forest toward the WindClan border stream, there was no sign or scent of Goldenpaw. Moonpaw tried her best to concentrate as Sunbeam led her patrol through the thick vegetation at the edge of the WindClan border stream. She even earned Sunbeam’s praise for catching a vole, though she only managed to grab it because it popped up right in front of her.

Eventually Sunbeam spotted a rabbit, half hidden in a clump of fern as it drank from the stream. She turned to her patrol, angling her ears toward the prey.

“Spread out,” she murmured, gesturing with her tail in a wide half circle. “I’ll scare it, and it’s bound to flee close to one of you.”

Silently Moonpaw and the two warriors found positions to cover any direction the spooked rabbit might take. Moonpaw crouched in the shelter of a twisty oak root and waited.

She found it difficult to keep her mind on the hunt. She kept seeing Goldenpaw’s body, his fur streaked with blood where she had clawed him. *What else could Morningkit make me do? Am I really the danger Brambleclaw told me about?*

“Moonpaw!” The voice was Sunbeam’s, yowling at her.

Moonpaw jerked back to the present to see the rabbit racing straight toward her. Clumsily she scrambled out from behind the root and gave chase as the rabbit veered away, but all she got was a glimpse of its bobbing white tail before it popped down a hole in a rocky bank.

“Great StarClan!” Nightheart exclaimed.

“Honestly, Moonpaw,” Sunbeam snapped, clearly frustrated. “I thought the changes we’ve made to help with Morningkit would help your focus. Is it still so hard for you to keep your mind on your job?”

“Sorry, Sunbeam,” Moonpaw muttered.

But she barely noticed her mentor’s anger. She had been trying to think of a way to make sure that Goldenpaw, and the rest of her Clanmates, could be safe from her when she was under Morningkit’s influence.

But now she had just realized something: If she was a danger to the Clan, there was no new plan that would solve her problems—unless she left ThunderClan altogether. Perhaps it would be best for every cat if she left Clan territory and made a new life for herself somewhere else. A hollow place opened up in her heart as she imagined giving up her kin, her Clanmates, and her imagined future with Goldenpaw.

Could I really leave Bayshine and Thriftear, and Shinepaw and Goldenpaw? she wondered. *Besides, where would I go? I’ve never been outside our territory before.*

Then Morningkit chimed in, her voice full of delight. *An adventure, just the two of us . . . ,* she mewed excitedly. *I like the sound of that!*

A shudder passed through Moonpaw. What might Morningkit be able to do to her if they were alone together? *But I have no other choice.*

Moonpaw lay in her nest, apparently drowsy, but in reality, she was only waiting for Goldenpaw and Shinepaw to sink deeper into sleep. Then she would be able to sneak out of camp and start her new life. She shivered, even though she was snug within the thick moss and bracken. *Am I really going to do this?*

The day that was just gone had been very precious to her. In the morning she had sought out her parents, Bayshine and Thriftear, where they sat beside the fresh-kill pile, sharing a squirrel.

“Want some?” her father had asked, beckoning with his tail. “There’s plenty.”

As Moonpaw crouched down and took a bite, she thought the squirrel tasted of sadness. This was the last time she would ever share prey with her parents, and they would never know where she had gone. It would be even harder for them, because they had already lost a kit. Her resolve almost wavered.

But it’s for the best, she told herself firmly. *If I stay, I might hurt them.*

“How is your apprenticeship going?” Thriftear asked her. “Are you getting along with Sunbeam?”

“Oh, yes, she’s a great mentor,” Moonpaw replied, pushing to the back of her mind the disastrous incident with the rabbit.

Thriftear stretched out her neck to give Moonpaw a lick around her ear. “I’m glad things are better now,” she purred.

Moonpaw could only sigh and lean into her mother’s shoulder. She had hoped for a while that things were getting better—she had even dreamed of taking Goldenpaw as her mate. But that was before she had realized that she was a danger to her Clan.

As if StarClan were allowing her one last, perfect morning with her kin, Sunbeam didn’t come looking for Moonpaw until almost sunhigh. She was able to spend time with Bayshine and Thriftear, relaxing, chatting, and sharing tongues in a way they’d hardly ever had time for since she became an apprentice. She felt safe and cared for, almost like when she was a kit, but her happiness brought a deeper pain because she knew she must give it up.

When Sunbeam led her out of camp and toward the lake, Moonpaw resolved to make this last session an exceptional one. She wanted Sunbeam to have a good memory of her.

“Okay,” Sunbeam meowed as they reached the lakeshore. “Today I want to go over the basics. Show me your hunter’s crouch.”

Moonpaw took up her position, careful to make sure that her legs—especially her hind legs—were exactly right and that her tail was tucked in along her side.

Sunbeam padded around her, then gave her a nod of approval. “Good. Now stalk that rock.” She pointed with her tail. “Imagine it’s a mouse.”

Moonpaw paused before beginning. “I’m checking the wind direction,” she explained. “So the mouse won’t scent me.”

“Good thought. Off you go, then.”

Very slowly, Moonpaw crept toward the mouse-rock. She remembered her very first lesson, when her mentor had taught her that a mouse would pick up the vibrations from her paws long before it could hear the sound she made. She glided over the ground, hardly letting her pads touch the pebbles, keeping the mouse-rock in sight as if it might suddenly leap up and scamper off.

“Now pounce,” Sunbeam ordered.

Moonpaw drew herself back into the crouch, wriggled her haunches, and took off, gripping the rock in outstretched paws. “I caught it!” she

exclaimed triumphantly.

Sunbeam padded up to her, letting out a *mrrow* of laughter. “That was exactly right,” she told Moonpaw. “You know, when you concentrate, you’re brilliant. I wish you could be like that all the time.”

So do I, Moonpaw thought. “I’ll try,” she promised.

But she knew that she wouldn’t. Because she wouldn’t be here.

Later, Moonpaw decided to tidy up the nests in her own den as a kind of final thank-you to her denmates for all their support. When she had finished fluffing up the bedding and checking for thorns and twigs, she slipped out through the ferns and came face-to-face with Goldenpaw.

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

“Oh yourself,” Goldenpaw mewed, stretching out his neck to touch noses with her. “Do you want to come for a walk with me?”

Moonpaw couldn’t think of any reason to say no, especially as her whole body longed to say yes. Surely, she couldn’t do any harm to Goldenpaw just walking in the forest, and there was no need to avoid him any longer when she would soon be gone.

Goldenpaw led her to the edge of the woods just above the lake, and they settled down in a drift of dead leaves underneath a beech tree. The sun was sinking across the lake; the sky was a blaze of scarlet and gold, reflected in the waves below. High above her head, the darkening sky had a greenish tinge, and the first warriors of StarClan were slipping into sight. Moonpaw let herself relax and gave herself up to the beauty.

“I’ve wanted to ask you something, Moonpaw,” Goldenpaw meowed eventually. “I like you—I mean, really like you. You’re so special and beautiful, and so brave, the way you’ve coped with Morningkit. I was hoping that one day, when we’re both full warriors . . . Do you think we could become mates?”

As Goldenpaw gave voice to something Moonpaw had felt growing between them, she felt a rush of joy, followed instantly by the blackest despair. This was probably the last time she would see Goldenpaw. They could never become mates.

But Moonpaw tried to hide her sadness. “I feel the same,” she whispered.

She felt even worse when she saw how Goldenpaw’s eyes lit up at her words, and how he let out the deepest, happiest purr. He hadn’t noticed that she hadn’t actually promised to become his mate.

She hoped that Goldenpaw would forgive her when he found her gone. *I'm leaving to protect him*, she told herself. *He'll find another cat eventually.*

Now, finally, Moonpaw was curled up in her nest, waiting for her denmates to settle. All day she had felt that she was saying a silent farewell to the cats who mattered to her most. But there was one cat she couldn't say goodbye to, even silently: Jayfeather.

Moonpaw hadn't dared to go anywhere near the medicine cats' den. She knew that if she had, Jayfeather would have somehow known that her mind was troubled. And his insight, his authority, would have made her confess everything to him. Her plan would be ruined before she had even started.

I can't risk that. I'm protecting them all.

At last, Moonpaw heard Goldenpaw and Shinepaw begin to breathe evenly as they sank more deeply into sleep.

It's time.

Moonpaw took a last look at the gently snoring heaps of fur: her denmates, her friends, the cats she had shared her kithood with. Then she took another, longer look at Goldenpaw. She wanted to wake him up to say a last goodbye, but she knew that if she did, he would convince her to stay. Instead, she had to be content with bidding a silent farewell to the life they could have shared together.

Then she headed out of the den; the ferns brushed gently against her sides, but Moonpaw felt as though they were thorns tearing off her pelt. She knew she had no choice. Since she had attacked Goldenpaw in her sleep, it was best that he never see her again. She had to go, for his own good.

Where are we going? Morningkit asked excitedly.

Out of Clan territories, Moonpaw replied, trying to sound more confident than she felt. *I'm going to try to make it as a rogue. I'm a good hunter; maybe I'll survive.*

Sounds good to me, Morningkit mewed. *As long as we can finally be alone together!*

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Chapter Twenty-Two

The elders were still asleep when Tawnypelt slid silently out of their den, ruffling up her fur against the dawn chill. The sky was growing pale; she could make out the network of bare branches at the top of the stone hollow and the glimmering pelt of Honeyfur, who was on guard at the entrance to the thorn tunnel.

Tawnypelt sat just outside the den and began to groom herself; she always found that the slow, rhythmic licking helped her to think. And today she had to think clearly: how to present her plan to the Clan leaders so that she could take warriors from every Clan on her quest. She had to convince them that every elder she had consulted was dreaming of what *must* be the Whispering Cave in SkyClan's old territory.

But making a plan was difficult when Tawnypelt couldn't forget what Dovewing had said to her. She missed Tigerstar; she felt as though she had a hole in her heart that she needed him to fill. It hurt her to know that her son was unhappy because of her.

I can't leave the Clans without reconciling with Tigerstar, she told herself. *I need to know which Clan I'm coming back to.*

Her decision made, Tawnypelt slipped out of camp with a nod to Honeyfur and headed down to the lake, then along the water's edge toward the ShadowClan border. She meant to see Tigerstar and tell him her plans. Before she crossed into SkyClan territory, she paused and looked up to where the last few warriors of StarClan still lingered as the dawn light strengthened.

“Please help me,” she whispered. “Please let my son listen to reason and support me.”

Tawnypelt did her best to feel hopeful, but she knew how hard it would be for Tigerstar to back down and admit that he had been wrong about her vision. If he still wouldn’t, Tawnypelt thought that perhaps it was time for her to consider Squirrelstar’s offer of a place in ThunderClan.

Or what about WindClan? she wondered, then lashed her tail, annoyed with herself. *I’m not going to think about Crowfeather now. Not for a single heartbeat.*

But even though she had choices, Tawnypelt hated the idea of being anything but a ShadowClan cat.

Crossing SkyClan territory, everything was quiet. When she reached the ShadowClan border, the markers were fresh, showing that the dawn patrol had passed by, but when she headed through the pine trees, she didn’t meet any cats until she wriggled through the barrier of brambles and entered the camp.

For a moment she hesitated, looking down to see Tigerstar sitting outside his den and a group of cats clustered around Cloverfoot, who was arranging hunting patrols.

No cat noticed Tawnypelt as she padded down to join them until she had almost reached the Clan leader’s den. Then Cloverfoot glanced up and broke off naming the cats who would go out together.

“Tawnypelt!” she exclaimed. “You’re back! Oh, it’s good to see you.”

The other cats gathered around her, echoing Cloverfoot’s enthusiastic greeting, but Tawnypelt only had eyes for Tigerstar. At the sound of her name, he had looked up, his whole face lit with happiness; a moment later, he had recollected his dignity and gave her a stiff nod.

“Greetings, Tawnypelt,” he meowed frostily. “I need to speak to you alone.”

He rose and with a gesture of his tail invited her to follow him. “I would have been surprised to see you,” he began when both cats were sitting in the privacy of the den, “but Dovewing confessed to me that she went to ThunderClan and asked you to come back.” His mouth quirked wryly. “I guess she was tired of seeing me moping around the camp.”

“She could see you were unhappy,” Tawnypelt commented.

Tigerstar let out a grunt. “It’s true, I hate it when we argue,” he admitted. “No matter what happens, you’re my mother, and I’ll always care for you.”

He hesitated, and then continued, “It must have been hard for you when Brambleclaw died. I wish I could have been there to support you.”

Tawnypelt was touched by her son’s sympathy. His words had been a kind of apology, and she knew how difficult that was for him. “I’ve missed you, and all of ShadowClan,” she told him.

“Are you home to stay, then?” Tigerstar asked, a hopeful look in his eyes.

“Not right now,” Tawnypelt replied. “I’ve been talking to the elders of every Clan—”

Tigerstar interrupted her with an impatient hiss. “You’re not still pursuing this plan with the elders?” he demanded, his cordial tones of a few moments before completely vanished.

“I’ve never given up on it,” Tawnypelt responded firmly.

Tigerstar glared at her, his shoulder fur beginning to bristle; then he relaxed with a long sigh. “Go on, then,” he mewed. “Spit it out.”

“I’ve been talking to the elders,” Tawnypelt explained, “because I’m sure they have the knowledge that we need. ‘What the eldest trees can see,’ according to what Bluestar told me in my vision. They can help us find somewhere else to make contact with StarClan, if we don’t have the Moonpool anymore.”

“*If* we need another Moonpool,” Tigerstar pointed out. “I still think that the Twolegs will leave once the real leaf-bare cold sets in.”

Tawnypelt ignored that. “Anyway,” she went on, “I finally realized that all the dreams they’ve described to me could be pointing to the same place.”

“Really?” Tawnypelt could tell that Tigerstar didn’t believe her. “And what is—”

Tigerstar’s question was interrupted by Cloverfoot’s voice coming from the entrance to the den. “Tigerstar, I’m sorry, but this may be important. Whistlebreeze and two of her Clanmates are here, asking to see you. They say it’s very urgent.”

Tawnypelt and Tigerstar exchanged a puzzled glance. Tawnypelt couldn’t see any reason why the younger WindClan medicine cat would be visiting ShadowClan, but a prickling in her paws told her that it really *was* as important as she said.

Tigerstar rose and padded out into the open; Tawnypelt followed him.

Outside in the camp, Whistlebreeze stood waiting, flanked on one side by Heathertail and on the other by Hootwhisker. As Tigerstar emerged, she

stepped forward and dipped her head in deepest respect.

"Greetings, Whistlebreeze," Tigerstar meowed. "What's all this about?"

Whistlebreeze swallowed, as if she was almost too overwhelmed to begin. "Kestrelflight and I went up to the Moonpool to check on what the Twolegs were doing," she began breathlessly. "Flutterfoot and Songleap came with us, in case there was any trouble."

"And was there?" Tigerstar asked impatiently.

Whistlebreeze shook her head. "No—just the opposite! When we got to where we could see the blue walls from a distance, Twolegs were there, and they were taking the walls down. Isn't that wonderful?"

Tigerstar gave Tawnypelt a narrow-eyed glance, as if he would have liked to say, *I told you so.*

"We reported to Harestar," Whistlebreeze continued, "and he sent messages to all the other Clans. He says you should come with us now, to see."

Tawnypelt's heart began to beat fast with hope. Perhaps Tigerstar *had* been right, and the Twolegs had gone away once leaf-bare really set in. But somehow, she couldn't make herself believe it. She couldn't accept that her vision of Bluestar meant nothing, or that it had all been in the imagination of an injured cat.

What have the Twolegs done?

While these thoughts were going through Tawnypelt's mind, Tigerstar had snapped into action. "Cloverfoot, fetch Puddleshine and Shadowsight," he ordered.

As the deputy raced off, Tigerstar beckoned with his tail to Hollowspring and Blazefire, who were standing nearby, listening wide-eyed to Whistlebreeze's news. "You can come with me," he meowed. "You too, Tawnypelt."

A moment later, Cloverfoot returned with the two medicine cats; from their excited expressions, she had obviously told them what was happening.

Tigerstar nodded to her. "Cloverfoot, you're in charge of the camp. The rest of you, follow me. And StarClan grant that we'll be able to speak with them again."

Tawnypelt brought up the rear as the hastily assembled patrol streamed out of the camp. Tigerstar's last words echoed in her mind.

What if we can't?

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Sunlight in his eyes woke Starlingpaw. Bleary and confused, he found himself slipping off the tree branch, and dug his claws in hard until he had regained his balance.

"Fox dung!" he muttered, his whole body beginning to tense with alarm. "I must have fallen asleep in the tree, and now the sun's coming up."

He knew he had to get back quickly, before Nectarsong came looking for him and realized he'd disobeyed Hawkwing by spending the night outside camp.

Maybe Hawkwing was right, Starlingpaw thought. *Maybe it was just a fox.* After all, he hadn't seen any sign of a cat.

He had eaten the squirrel that he caught earlier, too ashamed of the brutal way he had killed it to take it back into camp for the fresh-kill pile. Now he gathered up the bloodstained remains, intending to bury them before any other cat saw them.

He was about to scramble down the tree when he spotted movement in the bushes a few fox-lengths away, and two unfamiliar cats emerged. At first Starlingpaw thought they might be on a mission to give a message to Leafstar, but they veered away from the camp, heading toward the SkyClan border.

Trespassers! What are they doing here? he wondered.

Starlingpaw recognized the ThunderClan apprentice Moonpaw, with her weird, divided face. Walking alongside her was the orange-furred

apprentice he had seen behaving so badly at the Gathering, wriggling through the crowd, mocking the senior warriors, and flicking them with her tail. No cat had reprimanded her, and after a while she'd seemed to vanish.

Starlingpaw felt rather foolish for imagining that she might have been some kind of spirit, and although Moonpaw was looking straight ahead, not at her companion, the way their heads and mouths were moving it looked as if they were chatting together.

Excitement throbbed through Starlingpaw. Now he knew he had been right to set up his watch. He was going to catch the cat whose paws were set on the wrong path. He wondered whether he should climb down and confront them and force them to go with him to Leafstar. But then, he reflected, he would have to explain what he was doing outside the camp. It might be better to stay hidden and hope that the two apprentices would run into a patrol before they left SkyClan territory.

Then, as the two cats grew closer, Starlingpaw was able to hear what they were saying.

"It won't be long before we leave Clan territory," Moonpaw mewed. "Then I guess we'll have to live as rogues."

The orange cat gave a little skip of excitement. "It's going to be great!" she responded. "We can go wherever we want, and I'll have you all to myself, without any of those stupid rules."

"Those rules are meant to keep the Clan safe." Moonpaw sounded wistful. "There'll be nothing and no cat to keep us safe out there."

The orange cat butted Moonpaw's shoulder with her head. "Scaredy-mouse!"

Starlingpaw didn't like the sound of this conversation. Why had these two cats decided to leave Clan territory and live as rogues? *What have they done? Are they traitors?*

Moonpaw and her companion were approaching the tree where Starlingpaw was hiding. Bracing himself, he leaped down and landed right in front of them, confronting them with a fierce glare.

Startled, Moonpaw jumped back a pace, but the orange cat didn't seem intimidated at all. "Ooh, big fierce warrior!" she exclaimed, her voice mocking.

"What are you doing here on SkyClan territory?" Starlingpaw demanded. "Why do the two of you want to become rogues? What's wrong with you?"

When there was no immediate answer, he added, “I’m taking you to Leafstar!”

Maybe I can just pretend I got up and went for a stroll really early, he decided.

Moonpaw gave him a puzzled look. “‘You two’? What are you talking about?”

Her obvious bewilderment confused Starlingpaw. For a moment he couldn’t think of how to reply. Meanwhile the orange cat was dancing around him, flicking him with her tail and mewing, “Mouse-brain! Mouse-brain!” as if she thought he couldn’t see or hear her.

Anger swelled inside Starlingpaw. “Stop that!” he snarled, swiping at the orange cat as she pushed her face close to his.

A heartbeat later he stepped back, stunned. His paw had passed right through her. “What’s going on?” he asked.

The other two cats looked equally astonished. The orange cat squealed in a high-pitched voice, like a petulant kit. “You tried to hurt me!”

Moonpaw was staring at him as if she couldn’t believe what she had just witnessed. “You can see her?” she asked.

Starlingpaw couldn’t handle his confusion except by growing angrier still. “What’s going on?” he repeated, forcing the words out between his teeth. “Tell me, or you’ll be sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Moonpaw responded, holding out one paw in a calming gesture. “We’re just trying to leave Clan territory. You wouldn’t understand, but I promise it’s for every cat’s safety. Honestly, it’ll be for your own good if you leave us alone.”

“You can’t expect me to believe that!” Starlingpaw declared. The two cats didn’t seem to be a threat, but he had to be sure. “Tell me *why* you’re leaving.”

Moonpaw hesitated. “You really can see Morningkit?” she asked.

“If that’s the orange cat’s name, then yes, I can see her,” Starlingpaw meowed. “She’s sitting right over there, on that tree root. And she’s sticking her tongue out at me!” he added indignantly.

“Get lost, mouse-brain!” the orange cat hissed.

“Don’t call me that!” Starlingpaw snapped back.

This is so weird, he added to himself, suppressing a shiver. *I can see and hear her, so how come I can’t touch her? Is she a spirit, caught between two worlds?* He turned to Moonpaw. “Who is she?”

“Morningkit was my littermate,” Moonpaw explained. “But she died when she was a few days old. She speaks to me in my mind, and sometimes I can see her, but no other cat in ThunderClan can, not even the medicine cats. Except for Brambleclaw, when he was dying,” she added. “So how is it you can?”

By now, Starlingpaw had begun to figure things out. “I’m kin to Tree,” he replied. “And you know about all the stuff that he can see.” *I can’t tell her about seeing Crowfeather’s spirit,* he added to himself, *or she’ll know that I lied at the Gathering.*

Moonpaw nodded. “That makes sense. Now please will you let us go?”

Starlingpaw found Moonpaw’s explanation stranger than anything he had ever heard before, but oddly, he believed her. No cat would make up such an outlandish story. “That still doesn’t tell me why you have to leave the Clans,” he mewed.

Moonpaw drooped her head, scuffling with her forepaws on the ground. For some reason she looked ashamed. “Morningkit distracts me and keeps me from being fully in the real world,” she confessed. “She interrupts my training, she forces me to do things I don’t want to do, and she won’t leave, no matter what I do. She’s making me into a danger to my Clan, so the only way to keep my Clanmates safe is to exile myself and take her with me. I don’t want to leave, but I have to.”

“That’s right,” Morningkit agreed, puffing out her chest proudly. “Moonpaw belongs with me, and now we’re finally going to be together, instead of my sister trying to ignore me.”

Starlingpaw felt a pang of sympathy for Moonpaw, who was obviously distressed and trying to do the right thing. But ideas were beginning to come together in his mind. If Morningkit kept Moonpaw from being “fully in the real world,” did that make Moonpaw the cat with a paw in both worlds? He remembered what he had thought the first time he saw Moonpaw, with her divided face: *Is she the two-faced cat?*

With a jolt of excitement, Starlingpaw realized that he could save the Clans by helping Moonpaw do exactly what she wanted to do.

“Okay, I believe you,” he told Moonpaw. “But you might get into trouble crossing SkyClan territory. Some cat might think you’re trespassing or stealing prey.”

“We wouldn’t!” Moonpaw protested. “We only came this way so we wouldn’t come across any ThunderClan cats who might try to stop us.”

“I understand, and that’s why I’m going to come with you,” Starlingpaw responded. “That way, if we meet any SkyClan patrols, I can explain.”

“That’s so helpful of you!” Moonpaw looked up at him, her eyes shining. “You’re really kind, Starlingpaw.”

For a moment Starlingpaw had his doubts. Moonpaw seemed to be so good, so intent on saving her Clan. Surely, she couldn’t be the cat whose paws were padding down the wrong path.

Maybe she doesn’t even realize it, he reassured himself. *In which case, I’m doing her a favor. She can’t harm the Clans if she isn’t here.*

“Okay, let’s go,” he meowed.

On their way to the SkyClan border, they crossed the scent trail of a hunting patrol, but they met no cats before they reached the edge of Clan territory.

“This is it,” Starlingpaw announced. “Goodbye and good luck.”

“Thank you,” Moonpaw responded, while Morningkit danced around him, irritatingly flicking him with her tail.

The two she-cats crossed the border, Moonpaw with head drooping sadly and her tail trailing on the ground while Morningkit skipped along beside her, flickering in and out of Starlingpaw’s vision.

“May StarClan light your path!” Starlingpaw called after them.

As he watched them until they strolled out of sight, he felt as if he were going to burst with pride. He had saved the Clans. In his mind he pictured Kitescratch and wondered whether his father was watching him.

Are you proud of me too? he asked silently.

Starlingpaw turned and headed back toward the SkyClan camp, hoping that no cat had noticed he was missing. At least, he reflected, he wouldn’t have to keep watch perched in a tree anymore.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

The sun rose higher and higher as Moonpaw trekked through the unknown woodland. Inside her head, Morningkit hardly ever stopped chattering.

Isn't it great that we're finally running away together? she mewed cheerfully. *We should have done this moons ago, like I told you.*

Moonpaw didn't want to respond. Sadness threatened to overwhelm her as she thought back over the kin and Clanmates she was leaving behind. She wished she could have found another way for every cat to be safe, but however hard she tried, this was the only answer she could think of.

Not long before sunhigh, a strange, acrid scent began to tickle Moonpaw's nostrils, growing stronger as she walked on. At the same time, she could hear an erratic roaring noise, unbroken for several heartbeats, then a silence until the next one started up. It sounded as though some huge predator were roaming the forest, seeking its prey.

What's that? she asked herself.

I don't know, Morningkit responded, though Moonpaw hadn't been talking to her. *Isn't it exciting?*

The scent and the noise became stronger still until Moonpaw broke out of the trees and halted, staring. A narrow strip of grass separated her from a wider expanse of ground that was covered over with some kind of black stuff. It stretched away in both directions as far as Moonpaw could see.

Hesitantly she crept forward until she could reach out with one paw to touch the black surface. It was quite hard. As she drew her paw back, she realized that she had picked up some of the acrid scent.

"Yuck!" she exclaimed, wrinkling her nose. "I'll never—"

She broke off as the roaring noise started up again. Glancing along the black strip, she spotted a tiny dot in the distance, a glittering green color like a beetle's wings. The roaring grew rapidly louder; the glittering dot swelled in size until it became a massive creature, far bigger than any cat, racing along on round black paws.

Alarmed, Moonpaw jumped back as it swept by, sprawling on the ground. Her fur was buffeted by the wind of its passing, the acrid scent choking her, swamping all the smells of the forest.

Then it was gone, dwindling away into the distance.

Moonpaw sat up and gave herself a few calming licks. "Now I remember what that is!" she exclaimed aloud. "This black stuff is a Thunderpath, and that noisy creature is a monster. Sunbeam taught me all about them, but I never had the chance to see one before now. I guess I'm lucky the monster didn't notice me."

She expected a comment from Morningkit, but to her surprise, her sister was silent. Maybe she had been just as overwhelmed as Moonpaw herself.

***I** suppose I ought to cross it,* she thought uncertainly. Somehow, she felt that once she was on the other side of the black strip, she would really have left Clan territory behind. Her belly lurched at the thought; it seemed so final.

But this is what I have to do.

She rose to her paws and approached the Thunderpath once more. Another monster roared past as she reached the edge, followed by a third, heading the opposite way.

This isn't as easy as it looks, she thought nervously. *If one of those monsters catches me, it'll eat me for sure.*

We're going to cross? Morningkit's voice was back, sounding bright and eager. *Cool!*

Not cool, Moonpaw retorted. *Sunbeam told me how dangerous Thunderpaths are. You have to pick exactly the right time, when there are no monsters coming.*

Another monster swept by, but this time Moonpaw knew what to expect and stood her ground, waiting until it was gone. Tensely she stared back and forth, trying to judge whether it was safe to cross. There was another monster, still so far away she could hardly make it out, but the Thunderpath was fairly narrow; she judged she could be safely across before the monster was near enough to trap her.

Now! she urged herself.

Moonpaw took off, bounding across the hard black stuff, but within a heartbeat she heard Morningkit's panic-stricken wail. *No! Stop!*

Moonpaw hesitated, and in that moment the monster was upon her. She stared up at it, frozen in horror. It was the biggest yet, gleaming scarlet, with what looked like an enormous mouth gaping to swallow her up.

In the last moment she snapped out of her paralysis. Pushing off with her hind paws, she fled for the opposite side of the Thunderpath, the stench and noise of the monster swirling around her. Muscles straining, she kept going until she felt grass beneath her pads. Once she was safe, she collapsed onto one side, gasping in huge breaths. The monster roared off, the smell and sound fading.

When she had stopped shaking, Moonpaw sat up. *Why did you tell me to stop?* she demanded.

I thought there was a fox, Morningkit replied, sounding just as shaken. *You were running straight into its mouth!*

Moonpaw glanced around. There was a clump of bracken nearby, the same russet color as a fox's pelt. She couldn't pick up fox scent, but she couldn't pick up *anything* except the reek of the Thunderpath. Morningkit might be telling the truth.

But Moonpaw felt a horrible uneasiness churning in her belly. She knew that Morningkit wanted her to die, to be with her in her spirit world, but Moonpaw had never thought she would do anything to make that happen.

She decided that she had to believe Morningkit. Otherwise she would have bees swarming in her brain before she knew it. She would be too scared to take another paw step.

Clenching her jaws determinedly, Moonpaw dragged herself to her paws. "Let's move on," she mewed.

She plodded onward, so deep in thought that she hardly paid any attention to Morningkit's chatter. Eventually she was roused by a louder, plaintive mew.

Why aren't you talking to me?

I have a lot on my mind, Moonpaw responded.

Well, it's not fair. Morningkit's voice was sulky. *I thought we would have fun now that we're alone together, away from those stupid Clans. But all you do is ignore me!*

There would be no shutting her up, Moonpaw realized. And she might as well start treating Morningkit as a real companion if she was the only one she could have. *Okay,* she sighed. *What do you want to talk about?*

But Morningkit didn't have anything interesting to say. She went chattering on, pointing out a bird, a weird-looking leaf, a squirrel running up a tree trunk, while Moonpaw forced herself to say something suitable in reply.

I was fascinated by those things when I was a kit, she thought. *But I've grown past that. Morningkit never will.*

The sight of the squirrel made Moonpaw realize how hungry she was. She didn't risk chasing it up the tree, but she started looking for easier prey. Soon she spotted a thrush hopping at the edge of a patch of grass.

I'm going to stalk that bird, she told Morningkit, angling her ears toward her quarry. *Don't distract me, just for a few moments, okay?*

Morningkit was silent as Moonpaw began to creep up on the thrush, trying to remember everything that Sunbeam had taught her. The bird seemed unaware of her, pecking busily at the ground.

Wriggling her haunches, Moonpaw launched herself into a pounce. But as she landed, her paws outstretched to snag the thrush in her claws, the ground gave way under her weight. Wings fluttered past her face as she sank and found herself floundering in mud up to her belly. She hadn't realized that the open patch of ground was a marsh.

Panic gripped Moonpaw; she flailed all four legs as she tried to push herself backward and regain solid ground. She could imagine the mud oozing over her, covering her whole body and finally her head, so that she would choke on it and drown.

Do you think you might die? Morningkit asked interestedly. *It would be great if we were the same, wouldn't it?*

No! Go away! was Moonpaw's desperate response as the mud crept farther up her flanks.

Don’t be like that. I don’t have all those problems with food and sleep like you do. Imagine how easy everything would be for you. I never have to hunt for food like you do. I don’t have sleepless nights because I don’t sleep. It could be the same for you. It really will be awesome!

Moonpaw kept on struggling. She knew she couldn’t expect help from Morningkit, but her sister didn’t have to sound so gleeful about it.

Fury with her dead littermate gave Moonpaw more strength. With a gasp of relief, she found firm ground beneath her paws and managed to drag herself out of the marsh. She shook the worst of the mud from her fur and let herself collapse, shaking.

That was worse than the Thunderpath!

Morningkit said nothing, but Moonpaw had a distinct sense that her littermate was disappointed.

Moonpaw’s belly was still growling with hunger. She forced herself to her paws and set out again, carefully skirting the edge of the marsh. With the thrush long gone, she couldn’t see any more likely prey.

After a while, she began to pick up Thunderpath scents and sounds again, but they felt different somehow, not so overwhelming. And in the distance, she spotted the outermost dens of a Twolegplace.

The sight reminded her of stories that older warriors had told her about cats who had left the Clans to become kittypets with the Twolegs. She heard again in her mind her Clanmates’ disdainful voices and could see the dismissive twitches of their tails and whiskers.

They don’t hunt for their own food, Thornclaw had sneered. *Most of them aren’t even allowed outside their Twolegs’ dens.*

Cloudtail had twitched an ear in agreement. *They’re useless in a battle*, he had added.

But Moonpaw began to wonder whether she could survive as a rogue by herself. The two terrifying incidents, on the same day that she had left Clan territory, had sapped her confidence. Clearly, Morningkit had no interest in helping her stay alive—quite the opposite. And if Morningkit made her do weird, scary things, she might eventually kill her. But there would be nothing dangerous in a Twolegplace, no marshes to drown in, no Thunderpaths where she could be crushed by a monster—not if she had to stay inside the Twoleg den.

Besides, she wouldn't have to worry about a Twoleg's safety around Morningkit, the way she had to worry about that of her Clanmates. What harm could she do to a Twoleg? They were huge, and they had all kinds of ways to protect themselves.

Maybe . . .

Not sure if that was what she wanted, Moonpaw decided that she would at least check out the Twolegplace. She veered in that direction, and immediately Morningkit's voice sounded in her mind, loud and indignant.

What are you going there for? What do we need with Twolegs?

I don't know. I'm going to find out, that's all.

Her sister's response was sulky. *You're no fun at all!*

By the time Moonpaw reached the outskirts of the Twolegplace she was sore-pawed, tired, and still reeking of marsh mud. She crossed a small Thunderpath after checking carefully that no monsters were in sight, then paused, looking up hopefully at the Twoleg dens. They were so big, made of regular red stones, with gaps in the walls covered in shiny, transparent stuff. Each one was surrounded by a wooden barrier; between the barrier and the den were plots of grass and unfamiliar Twoleg plants.

Hurry up, then, pick one! Morningkit's voice sounded peevish. *Or let's go. But don't just stand there like a frozen rabbit!*

Moonpaw took a single pace toward the nearest den.

"Stop right there!" a voice sounded alongside her. "Where do you think you're going?"

Turning, Moonpaw gulped as she saw three kittypets advancing toward her. Even the smallest was much bigger than her; they had plump bodies and long, glossy fur.

The kittypet in the lead, a hulking white tom with black splotches, strode right up to Moonpaw, pushing his face aggressively close to hers. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"I—I'm looking for a Twoleg that might want to share its home," Moonpaw stammered, dipping her head politely. "Please can you tell me where I should go?"

"I don't know, but you can't stay here." The second kittypet was a sleek gray she-cat. "This is our place."

Moonpaw retreated a pace. "I'm sorry. . . ."

"Hey, don't be so mean." The third kittypet was a ginger tom, and to Moonpaw's relief his green eyes were friendly. "She's not doing any harm."

The white tom thrust him aside. “Shut your mouth, Rufus,” he hissed. “Stay out of this.”

Meanwhile the gray she-cat was prowling closer to Moonpaw, sliding out her claws.

Isn’t this exciting? Morningkit trilled.

Moonpaw ignored her. Swallowing, she braced herself for an attack. She had done well in battle practice with Sunbeam, but she had never been in an actual fight with an opponent who wanted to hurt her. And the gray she-cat was much bigger than her. She couldn’t expect any help from Rufus, who was being blocked by the white tom.

As the gray she-cat stalked toward her, Moonpaw thought of running. But she was too exhausted to run fast or far. The kittypets would soon catch her. Instead, she arched her back and let out an angry, defiant hiss.

I won’t go down without a fight!

But as the gray she-cat raised her paw to strike, a streak of golden fur flashed past Moonpaw. “Goldenpaw!” she gasped in mingled surprise and delight.

Goldenpaw barreled into the gray kittypet, carrying her off her paws. While he jumped on top of her, battering her around her head with both forepaws, Moonpaw flung herself into the battle, raking her claws across the she-cat’s haunches.

The she-cat let out a screech of pain, managed to push Goldenpaw off, and fled, yowling as she went. The white tom raced after her, leaving only the friendly Rufus behind.

Moonpaw had no interest in him or any other cat except for Goldenpaw. She gazed deeply into his eyes, drinking in the loving look that he gave her. She felt that she could stand like that forever, hunger and weariness forgotten.

Behind her, Rufus cleared his throat. “Do you two know each other?”

Moonpaw spun around to face him. “Oh, I’m sorry!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t mean to ignore you. My name is Moonpaw, and this is my friend Goldenpaw.”

“Her future mate,” Goldenpaw declared in a voice that defied any cat to argue.

Rufus gave him a nod. “Hi. It’s good to meet you. My name’s Rufus.”

“Thank you for standing up for me,” Moonpaw murmured.

“No problem,” Rufus meowed cheerfully. “Do you still want directions to likely housefolk, or . . .” He angled his ears toward Goldenpaw.

“I’m not sure,” Moonpaw replied. “If that’s what kittypets are like, I don’t want to be one. But I don’t think I can survive alone.”

“You won’t be alone now,” Goldenpaw declared.

“Okay. Good luck, then.” With a friendly nod, Rufus headed off alongside the line of Twoleg dens.

“How did you find me?” Moonpaw asked as she watched him go.

“I followed your scent trail, of course,” Goldenpaw replied. “Why did you leave without me? I can’t tell you how upset I was.”

Moonpaw stared at her paws. “I’m sorry,” she mewed. “I was afraid that I would hurt you again, or some other cat. So I had to go. I’m a rogue now—or I could catch up with Rufus and become a kittypet.”

Goldenpaw stepped up to her and nuzzled her ear. “Mouse-brain,” he mewed affectionately. “I’m not bothered by what happened.”

The hardest thing Moonpaw had ever done was to take a pace back from him. “It’s no use,” she whispered. “You belong with the Clans, safe from me and Morningkit. We’re dangerous cats.”

Y*eah, dangerous!* Morningkit butted in.

“I belong with *you*,” Goldenpaw insisted. “We’ll figure out a way for me to make peace with Morningkit. I love you so much, Moonpaw. I want to be by your side, and whatever dangers we meet, we’ll face them together.”

“Oh, if only . . .” Moonpaw sighed. “But I can’t let you.”

“It’s not about *letting* me,” Goldenpaw retorted. “Maybe one day we can return to our Clan, but until then, you’re stuck with me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Moonpaw was so shaken by mingled joy and terror that for a few heartbeats she couldn’t speak. She could hardly believe that any cat would love her so much that he would risk what Morningkit might do, and leave his life in the Clan behind him, for her sake.

But she realized that there was nothing for her to do but give in. “I shall love you forever, Goldenpaw,” she mewed.

Side by side, their pelts brushing, the two cats headed away from the Twolegplace. With Goldenpaw so close to her, Moonpaw felt safer and

happier than ever before. *Maybe everything will be okay.*

Before long, Moonpaw felt a drop of rain on her nose. Quickly the drop became a downpour, and she and Goldenpaw fled for shelter among some bushes.

“As soon as this eases off, I’ll hunt,” Goldenpaw meowed as he curled himself around Moonpaw. “And when we’ve eaten, we can head off again. We’re going to see so many interesting things, Moonpaw. It’ll be exciting, you’ll see.”

“New places, other cats, maybe even other Clans,” Moonpaw murmured drowsily.

But before she could fall asleep, Morningkit’s voice sounded smugly in her head. *Now that it’s raining, your scent will be washed away. No other cat will be able to find us. And eventually,* she added, *I’ll find a way to get rid of this dumb golden furball, too.*

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Chapter Twenty-Five

To reach the Moonpool the cats had to trek across what seemed like unending moorland hills. The way seemed even longer to Tawnypelt; she was so eager to get there and see what the Twolegs had done.

Tigerstar was in the lead, followed by the two medicine cats. Blazefire and Hollowspring, the two warriors he had named to accompany them, brought up the rear, while Tawnypelt ranged alongside, keeping her eyes open for danger.

The WindClan cats had gone ahead, but Tawnypelt could still see them, tiny with distance, toiling up the next slope.

"I hope this means the medicine cats will finally be able to speak with StarClan again, now that they can reach the Moonpool," Blazefire began.

"Yes," Hollowspring agreed. "Then Hawkwing can get his nine lives and become Hawkstar. Everything will be back to normal."

Good luck with that, Tawnypelt thought wryly, with a twinge of regret that Leafstar would no longer be SkyClan's leader. Mostly she felt hopeful, but her pads were pricking with misgivings. Why would the Twolegs have put up the blue wall if they were going to take it away and leave everything as it was? Cats who had visited the Moonpool before the walls went up had reported small changes; would everything be changed back now? *I can't believe it can all be so easy.*

"Tawnypelt." Tigerstar beckoned her with a sweep of his tail, and she padded up to join him at the head of the patrol. "Now that we know that the Twolegs are leaving," the Clan leader went on, "we can stop worrying. You can come home and be a regular warrior again. We've all missed you."

Tawnypelt still couldn't share her son's confidence. It would be great if the Moonpool were reopened and everything went back to normal, but she didn't entirely believe it. Besides, she questioned herself, if the Clans really had the Moonpool back, what would that mean for her?

Is there something wrong with me, that I had visions and believed them? I just don't know what to think.

As Tawnypelt approached the Moonpool with her Clanmates, she spotted a milling group of cats at the foot of the rocky slope that led to the top of the hollow. Crowfeather and Kestrelflight had joined the WindClan cats, while Ivypool and Alderheart represented ThunderClan. Frostdawn was there with Owlnose, the RiverClan deputy; Hawkwing of SkyClan had brought the Clan's medicine cat Fidgetflake.

Crowfeather made his way through the crowd of cats to Tawnypelt's side. The expression in his blue eyes was bleak. "I don't like the look of this," he meowed, angling his ears upward.

Tawnypelt's gaze followed where he pointed, and she let out a gasp. The line of bushes that had barred the entrance to the hollow had disappeared. In its place was a wall of straight-sided gray stones that stretched around the top of the hollow in both directions as far as Tawnypelt could see.

"What have they done?" she exclaimed.

No cat could give her an answer.

"Now that every Clan is here," Hawkwing began, his voice raised to carry to the whole group, "we can investigate. Follow me."

As he led the way up the slope, Tawnypelt caught a glimpse of Tigerstar's tail twitching in annoyance; of course, she reflected, he wouldn't like a mere deputy taking charge.

The rest of the cats swarmed up after Hawkwing, leaping from rock to rock, until they all reached the surrounding wall. Exclamations of dismay rose from every cat as they realized that at the bottom of the wall the ground was now covered with the same hard black stuff that formed the surface of Thunderpaths.

"I can't believe this!" Alderheart groaned.

The wall was low enough for the cats to leap onto the top. Tawnypelt didn't think there could be anything worse inside the hollow, but when she

looked down from the wall, she saw that she was wrong. A cry of consternation escaped her at the sight that met her gaze.

The spiral path, with its paw prints of the ancient cats, had been obliterated. The sides of the hollow had been smoothed out, covered with grass except for wedge-shaped sections all around, filled with unfamiliar Twoleg plants. There was a gap in the wall, where the stream poured over the rim of the hollow, and a second one where regular chunks had been cut out of the slope, leading downward and covered with the same gray stones.

The waterfall still poured down into the Moonpool itself, but the flat stones at the edge, where the medicine cats used to crouch to commune with StarClan, had vanished. Instead, the pool was edged with a strip of pebbles like the ones on the lakeshore, and placed around it at intervals were weird-looking rocks made of flat branches.

"What are those things?" Frostdawn asked, pointing with her tail.

"Twolegs sit on them," Hawkwing replied. "There were some near SkyClan's gorge. This is a place for Twolegs, all right. They'll come and sit on those rocks and look at the water."

"Why?" Frostdawn wondered.

"I suppose they like it," Alderheart suggested. "It's beautiful, after all."

"Not anymore," Crowfeather grunted.

While every cat was staring down in dismay, Tawnypelt began to pad along the top of the wall until she reached the stream. Here the strip of Thunderpath stuff became a wider stretch of ground, like the one beside the half-bridge between ShadowClan and RiverClan territories. A small Thunderpath she had never seen before followed the stream for a while and then wound away into the distance.

Beside the Thunderpath was a strange Twoleg tree, with a thin, straight trunk and, instead of branches, a wide, flat piece of wood with weird markings on it.

"What's that?" she murmured to herself.

"It's a sort of Twoleg border marker." Tawnypelt realized that Ivypool had padded quietly up behind her. "We saw something like it when we were on our quest to pay the debt, when we found the wildcats. It means the Twolegs have claimed this place for their own."

"But it isn't theirs!" Tawnypelt protested, sliding out her claws in indignation.

Ivypool shrugged. “It is now.”

While Tawnypelt had been investigating the Thunderpath, the medicine cats had leaped down from the wall and were padding down to the pool itself. Whistlebreeze was the first to approach the water, crouch uncomfortably on the pebbles, and stretch out her neck to touch her nose to the surface.

Tawnypelt held her breath; she felt that every cat was doing the same. This was the moment when they would learn whether StarClan still visited the Moonpool in spite of the Twolegs’ desecration.

At last, Whistlebreeze pulled back. Her eyes were closed, and as she opened them, she looked as though she had gazed on something unspeakably horrifying. But Tawnypelt realized it was much worse than that.

“There’s . . . nothing,” Whistlebreeze mewed hoarsely. “No connection at all with StarClan. It just feels . . . empty. The Twolegs have destroyed everything that made the Moonpool special.”

The warriors still standing on the wall said nothing, and it was Shadowsight who broke the silence.

“Even if the Moonpool hadn’t changed,” he began, “how could we medicine cats meet here? How could the leaders come to ask for StarClan’s advice, or to get their nine lives? It’s clear this place is going to be crawling with Twolegs. It isn’t ours anymore. What are we going to do?”

A deeper silence fell as Shadowsight finished speaking. Tawnypelt could feel that her devastation was shared by all the other Clan cats. No cat could answer Shadowsight’s question. They were looking at a future where they were completely cut off from StarClan.

“Tawnypelt.” Tigerstar turned toward her. “I’m sorry. You tried to tell me, you tried to tell every cat, and I didn’t listen. You were right all along.” Tawnypelt could tell how reluctant he was to speak, and how much it must be costing him to admit he had been wrong. He hesitated, still struggling with pride, then continued, raising his voice a little so that every cat could hear. “I trust you. I’ll do whatever you ask, to help you fulfill whatever StarClan wants from you. And I’ll back you with the other Clans.”

Tawnypelt was touched by his earnestness and relieved that now she could be back on good terms with him. She was thankful that, at last, he believed her.

But then she spotted Crowfeather gazing at her; the grim look they exchanged filled her with a sense of dread.

We must *resolve this, and soon. I only hope that my idea is the right one.*

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About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the bestselling author of the Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK. Enter the wild at warriorcats.com.

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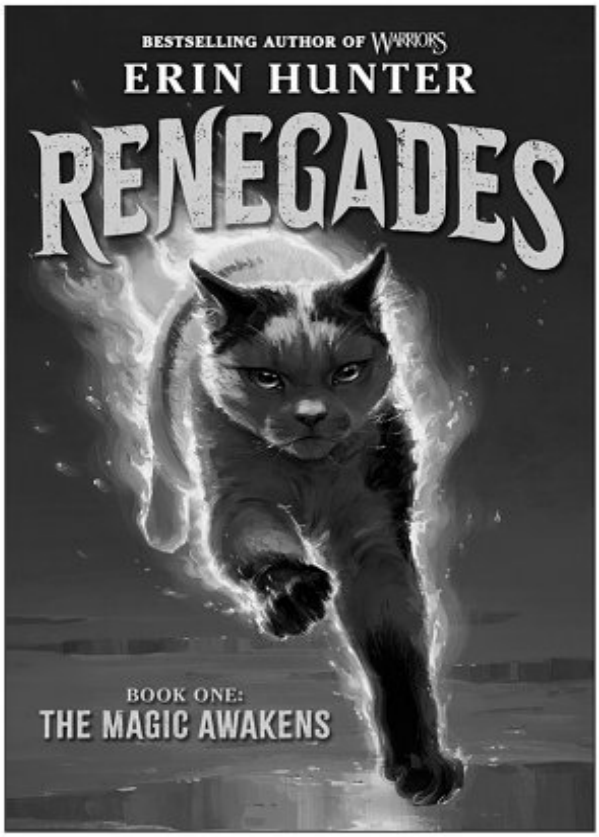

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FIRST EDITION

Cover art © 2026 by Owen Richardson
Cover design by Julia Tyler

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025946023

Digital Edition MARCH 2026 ISBN: 978-0-06-335718-1
Print Edition ISBN: 978-0-06-335716-7

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